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Srimad Bhagavad Gita: Simple Rendering

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This work is a brief rendering of each chapter of Gita, and is meant to serve as an introductory reading of Gita for interested readers who find it difficult to comprehend the work. Necessary comments and explanations have been added wherever necessary to make it intelligible. Serious readers, however, are advised to go through the original text/translation, preferably with a commentary.

Introduction

Srimad Bhagavad Gita, or more popularly, Gita is the spiritual and philosophical heartbeat of India. The best that India has to give to the world in the fields of wisdom, religion, philosophy and spirituality is Gita. Whatever India has achieved in these areas is poetically preserved in Sanskrit in this short work of seven hundred verses in eighteen chapters.

The poetic beauty and the philosophical clarity of the work is unparalleled in the history of the world literature. Every Hindu lives and dreams in Gita, and when he dies, he is given a farewell of chants from Gita. Every practising Hindu makes it a point to recite from it daily, every philosophical Hindu tries to study and understand the work, and every mystic Hindu strives to mould his life according to Gita.

Gita belongs to the Bhishma Parva of the epic Mahabharata, and is in dialogue form between Sri Krishna and Arjuna just before the battle of Kurukshetra was to take place.

The Background

Arjuna and his four brothers were arrayed against their cousins in a deadly battle for kingdom. Warriors had opted for the war as the only option left to decide the right inheritor of the throne, and had joined one of the two sides depending on their preference.

Arjuna was the greatest warrior of his time who headed his army as one of the chiefs. His charioteer was Lord Krishna, who was also a great friend and mentor of Arjuna. Just before the war was to begin, Arjuna requested Krishna to take the chariot in the middle of the battlefield so that he could have a look at the chief warriors of the opposing armies.

What he saw appalled him. Standing against each other were close relatives, friends, teachers and such others to kill and ready to get killed. The total number of men involved was in millions. Arjuna became depressed at the sight, and he refused to take part in the war. Instead, he wanted to give up everything and become a mendicant.

This was unacceptable to Sri Krishna, since Arjuna had come prepared to take part in the war in accordance with his dharma. Lord Krishna then preached Arjuna about his duties, his real nature, the nature of the world, and the nature of the Supreme Reality, so that he could come out of his despondency. In the process, the Lord discussed aspects of human life: its aspirations, expectations, and state of perfection.

A few basics regarding Gita

The Upanishads are the gist of the Vedas, and the Gita is the gist of the Upanishads. Thus, the spiritual essence of the Vedas has been recorded in the seven hundred verses of eighteen chapters of Gita.

Each of the eighteen chapters of the book is named as a different yoga. This means that one can attain perfection by following any of these chapters. The first chapter is Arjuna Vishada Yoga, which implies that one can get united with God even through sorrow.

Although Gita was spoken to Arjuna in the battlefield by Sri Krishna, it slowly became the heartbeat of Hindus, Hinduism and Hindu philosophy. However, there are some misconceptions regarding this great work which need to be clarified.

Many scholars raise questions: a. whether Gita is an integral part of Mahabharata b. whether there really was a Kurukshetra war, and c. whether Krishna and Arjuna really existed. The fact is that the philosophy taught in Gita can be found throughout the Mahabharata. So, if Gita is not accepted as an integral part of the epic, then those portions of Mahabharata that contain similar teachings, too have to be discarded.

Also, in the Indian tradition, the content of any work is more important than its external form. So, for a true seeker, reality of Krishna, Arjuna and the war are meaningless, since the core spiritual teachings of Gita are priceless.

One popular allegation against Gita is that Sri Krishna incited Arjuna for the war through this work. But this is not true. When all peace process between Pandavas and Kauravas had failed, only then the decision for the war was taken. And when Arjuna came prepared to fight, he had no right to back out from his sacred duty as per the conventions of varna-ashrama dharma. In fact

Sri Krishna only placed before Arjuna's vacillating mind the philosophy of life which helped him take the final decision.

Many wonder how Sri Krishna went on talking for more than two hours (the time taken to recite the entire Gita) when the two great armies were raring to cut down each other. This misconception has been cleared by Acharya Shankara who wrote in his commentary that Vyasa composed the 700 verses of Gita to elucidate the Lord's words spoken to Arjuna just before the war. Thus Gita can be treated both as the words of the Lord, as is commonly believed; or can be treated as the view of Lord Krishna expressed faithfully by Vyasa. In either case it is Lord's words only.

The correctness of a system is measured by its applicability at the micro and macro level. Gita handles issues both at micro and macro level. For example, there is the talk of action at cosmic level, and also as individual duty in the form of Varnashrama dharma. Similarly, rebirth is preached at the individual level, and the cyclic existence of the universe is explained at the macro level.

It is usual to hear from people that Gita should be read in old age, or by monks. What they fail to realise is that the book is about strength, duty and achievement. It contains the philosophy of life and gives solution to all that one faces daily. The central teaching of Gita is the attainment of the final beatitude of life, which is perfection or eternal freedom. One way to attain this is to perform one's duties unselfishly.

Many young people think that the book is not relevant for the present age. What they forget is that: (a) Gita was preached to a dejected Arjuna. This means that even the most distressed person can make use of it to uplift himself (b) It delivers the message of strength. So, a regular reading of the book fills one with strength and hope, and (c) it was taught by a calm Sri Krishna amidst war, which means that it is beneficial even for the most active person. In fact today's turbulent society needs Gita much more than whatever ancestors needed.

Gita is not a sectarian work. Its teachings are broad, universal and sublime, and do not belong to any cult, sect, creed, age or country. It has a message of solace, freedom, salvation, perfection and peace for the entire humanity. It is also a samanvya shastra, the book of harmony and synthesis, which brings together various aspects of Indian way of life, religion, philosophy and spirituality.

Chapter I

Arjuna Vishada Yoga: Distress of Arjuna

The chapter describes the despondency of Arjuna that came over him just before the war was to begin. It begins with the question by Dhritarashtra to Sanjay, his minister-cum-charioteer-cum-war reporter, regarding the news of the battle that was raging between his sons and his nephews.

In reply Sanjay narrated the war situation as it had been. Duryodhana, the son of the King, was the usual confident self before the war, and he described the chief warriors, their strength, weapons, flags and trumpets, and also made a comparative description of both the armies to Drona, his war teacher and also one of his chief warriors.

It was then that Arjuna requested Sri Krishna to take his chariot to the middle of the battleground so that he could survey the chiefs of both the sides. What he saw then, was shocking even to the battle hardened heart of Arjuna. Facing each other were the great warriors ready to kill and get killed. What more, nearly everyone had his relatives facing him in the deadly battle. And what for? So that either Duryodhana or Yudhishthira could rule! Although it was a dharma yuddha, the righteous war, but the expected manslaughter was going to be phenomenal. Indeed, it was the greatest war in the history of the world caused by a family feud.

Arjuna's shock was immense. The future wailing of the widows, cries of the orphans, destruction of human resources, and the expected sight of the earth soaked with blood moved his heart to extreme depression and despondency. He was filled with the worst kind of pitiful emotions, accompanied by a dry mouth, trembling body, shaking limbs, profuse sweating, and a loss of physical steadiness.

He could also foresee the degeneration of the social order that would be the result of such a great holocaust. With so many people of the warrior caste dead, inter caste marriages would be inevitable, which would ultimately pollute the religious rites and ceremonies. Thus the very religious order of the universe was in the danger of getting disturbed.

Arjuna refused to fight.

Expressing what he had to express to Sri Krishna, he laid aside his famous bow, Gāndiva, and collapsed in the backside of the chariot. At that moment he was an embodiment of melancholy, and so he resolved that under no condition was he going to take part in the genocide.

The great sorrow and despondency of Arjuna was not, and is not, unique to him. Everyone has to face sorrow, delusion and pain at some point of his life, when he feels completely lost and sees only darkness around. It is in those moments that one needs a guru, without which he would fail to come out of the vicious law of periodicity. He would continue to revolve and revolve round his pain.

This was the reason why Lord Krishna, the incarnation of that age, spoke out his spiritual message in the next chapters. In the seventh chapter he says that despondency (Ārta) is one of the four conditions when one seeks God.

People of the world are always in some kind of despondency, and hence in need of a saving message. Lord Krishna gave that saving message to the world through Arjuna, who was not only despondent, but was immersed in the ocean of grief.

Chapter II

Samkhya Yoga: The way of Ultimate Reality

The Upanishads are the gist of the Vedas, the Gita is the essence of the Upanishads, and the second chapter is the gist of Gita. Thus, this chapter contains everything that the Vedas have to say.

Sri Krishna admonishes Arjuna (sl 1-3): Arjuna was overwhelmed with sorrow which made his eyes swell with tears. Sri Krishna was surprised at this sudden development. To remind Arjuna of his duty in this sacred war, the Lord then spoke encouraging words to him, 'Form where has come this lowness of spirit, which is dishonourable, unbecoming to an Aryan (a cultured person), and which is an obstacle to the attainment of the high heavens? Do not yield to impotence, O Arjuna. It does not become you. Shake off this cowardliness and arise!'

Arjuna's lamentations continue (sl 4-10): Arjuna continued with his lamentations and said that he would prefer to live on the charity of others (as monks live) than kill his teachers and elders to enjoy the vast empire. However, he admitted that he was confused and was unable to distinguish between the right and the wrong in this matter, and so he was seeking shelter with Sri Krishna to guide him out of the moral disaster that loomed overhead.

The introductory verses of Gita end here. From this point onward, Lord Krishna expounds the philosophy of life, society, religion, and spirituality to Arjuna. By the medium of Arjuna, a really fit and competent disciple, Lord Krishna showers his grace to the whole humanity, drowning in the ocean of grief and delusion, which is samsāra, the world.

The wise grieve for no one (sl 11-13): Lord Krishna ridicules Arjuna by telling him that he was behaving like an ignorant person by grieving unnecessarily, and yet was speaking like a wise person concerning religious duties (in the previous chapter). This implied that he had no consistency, and he was like a wild, confused person. The truly wise do not grieve for the living, nor for the dead, since they know that the true individuality of a person lies with the Self which neither dies, nor is born. Self being eternal, there never was a time when Arjuna, Lord Krishna, or others did not exist; nor would they ever cease to exist. As the Self residing in the body experiences childhood, youth, and old age, so does it experience death, which is only moving from one body to another.

These three verses are at the heart of the philosophy of Gita. The whole of Vedanta, and also the subsequent chapters of Gita are elaboration, explanation, and implications of these three verse.

Ignore dualities to reach the highest (sl 14-15): Dualities like heat and cold, pleasure and pain, good and bad, purity and impurity, virtue and vice, life and death etc. are born due to the contact of senses with their respective objects. The Self has nothing to do with these dualities. So, those who aspire for immortality (or a higher way of life), should not get moved by any of the dualities.

Duality is samsara, non duality is spirituality. The goal of true spirituality is to come out of the bondages caused by dualities. Even dharma (right way of life), and adharma (the evil) are dualities, and hence both are shunned at the highest level of spirituality. Being good is not the goal of Hinduism, but transcending both goodness and evil is its goal.

The nature of Reality (sl 16-18): Every philosophy's aim is to find the nature of Reality. According to Gita, Real is that which never ceases to be, and the unreal never comes into existence. The truly imperishable in this universe is the Self, that which pervades everything, and that is truly avyaya (immutable). It is nitya (eternal), anashi (imperishable), aprameya (incomprehensible), and is the indwelling spirit of the bodies. The body alone is perishable, but not the Atman.

The use of term aprameya (incomprehensible) for the Self implies that the Self is knowing- Consciousness, and hence cannot become an object of knowledge. The Self cannot be known through any of the sense, the mind, or by any other means. Even the scriptures can only point at it indirectly. The Self is svatah siddha, self evident, so It can be known only through one's own realisation.

The Soul is all pervading, eternal etc. (sl 19-25):

Sri Krishna explains that the true individuality of a man does not lie with his body-mind-ego complex, but with Atman -- the all pervading, indestructible self which is unborn, ever present, and everywhere present. So, it was perfectly alright to kill if duty demands so. However, let us not conclude that Sri Krishna was advocating the philosophy of killing and war. On the contrary, he himself had tried to persuade Duryodhana to avert the war, but the wise counsel did not prevail. It should be noted here that Hinduism sanctions war only when it is born of righteousness, and not when it is caused due to greed, ego, pride or self aggrandisement. Also, the philosophy that the soul gets neither killed, nor is the killer can be practised only by those who have realised the all pervading Supreme Self as the true Reality. As a result, those who are established in this knowledge, are not scared of death, nor do they get swayed by dualities like heat and cold, joy and grief, life and death etc. Thus the philosophy preached here is universal, but its application in the matter of killing is entirely personal. People who are swayed by self interest or dualities are not at all fit to practise this.

The Self can neither slay anyone (i.e. It never becomes a doer), nor can It be slain (i.e. It can never become an object). It is never born, nor does It ever die, and it is also not that having once been, It ceases to be. Unborn, eternal, ever present, primeval (ever since), It is not slain when the body is slain. (All material objects, including the body, undergo six kinds of modification: birth, existence, growth, transformation, decay, and death. The Self is beyond these modifications--Sad vikara).

He who knows the Self to be indestructible, eternal, unborn and immutable - how can he slay It? Using an example, the Lord says that as a person throws away his old garments, so does the Self cast off worn-out bodies to enter a new body.

The Lord knows that it is very difficult to comprehend the mystery of the Self. So He describes It again and again in various ways to Arjuna: Weapons cut It not; fire burns It not, water wets It not, the wind does not dry It up. Eternal, all-pervading, unchanging, immovable, the Self is the same for ever. This Self is said to be unmanifest (because It cannot be experienced by the senses), incomprehensible, and unchangeable (the Self is infinite, and has no parts that can undergo a change).

Since the Self is of this nature, Arjuna should not grieve, is the conclusion of the Lord.

Two other views regarding the Self (sl 26-28):

Arjuna does not seem to be moved by what he heard from the Lord. This made the Lord discuss the remaining two views regarding the Self.

1. If one thinks the self to be being born and dying repeatedly (and staying in the heaven or the hell in between), even then there is nothing to grieve for, because in that case every born self will die and every dead self will be born again. So, birth and death being unavoidable, why grieve?
2. If one thinks the Self to be mere combinations of cause and effect, then also one need not grieve at death. Why? Because before coming into existence, the self was non-existent and after the body perishes, it will again become non-existent. So, why grieve for something which is so impermanent by nature?

In this way, the Lord presents the three views regarding Self and shows that whatever view Arjuna might be having regarding the Self, there was no reason for him to give up his duty.

Concluding the discourse on the Self (sl 29-30)

The Lord concludes his talk on the nature of the Self by saying that some look on the Self as a wonder; some speak of It as a wonder; some hear of It as wonder; still others, though hearing, do not understand It at all. The Self, which dwells in all bodies, can never be slain.

Varnashrama Dharma: Duty and its results (sl 31-38): Arjuna is not yet convinced. He is ready neither for the highest philosophy, nor for logical reasoning. So, the Lord tries to convince Arjuna by using arguments based on social behaviour: Considering even his duty as a warrior, Arjuna should not waver like this, because for a warrior there can be no better duty than joining a righteous war. Only fortunate warriors get an opportunity to take part in an unsought war, which acts like an open door to the heaven.

"If you refuse to fight this righteous war, then you will fail in your duty, lose your reputation, and incur sin. People will talk about your disgrace forever. And, to the honoured, dishonour is worse than death. The great warriors will think that you have retreated from the battle out of fear, and those who have greatly esteemed you till then, will lose their respect for you. Your enemies will speak many unmentionable words and will ridicule your ability. Could there be anything more bitter than that? You will go to heaven if you get killed in this battle, or you will enjoy the kingdom on this earth if you become victorious. Therefore, arise, and join the battle."

The Lord further advised Arjuna that he should regard dualities like pleasure and pain, gain and loss, and victory and defeat alike, and engage himself in the battle (his duty). This way, he won't incur any sin.

These eight verses mark the social philosophy of the Hindus based on Vedanta. Those who have acquired the highest knowledge of the Self, do not get disturbed by any duality. But, those who have not yet reached that stage, but aspire for that, they must perform their varnashrama dharma (duties based on caste and age) without getting attached to any kind of duality. That is the way to purify oneself to become fit for the highest knowledge of the Self.

Karma Yoga and Self Knowledge (sl 39- 41): Till now the wisdom of sāmkhya-- the true nature of the Absolute Reality-- was imparted to Arjuna. Now the science of Yoga (Karma Yoga) is expounded. A person who gets established in this Yoga (by performing duty, without getting attached to the results of action), succeeds in breaking through the bonds of karma (action) and attains the Supreme Knowledge (merit and demerit, virtue and sin, pain and pleasure, and such dualities constitute the bondage of all action when performed with a motive).

No effort is ever lost, and there is no adverse effect in Karma Yoga. Even a little practice of this Yoga saves one from the great fear of repeated birth and death. In this path, there is only one resolute determination (i.e. God realisation) for its practitioner, but the desires of those who work to enjoy the fruits of work are endless.

Thus it can be seen that the Lord takes up various types of arguments to remove the darkness that surrounds Arjuna's mind. In the verses 39-41, the concept of Karma Yoga is introduced, since Arjuna is not yet fit to take up Samkhya Yoga, which can be practised only by all renouncing monks. Karma Yoga is the special contribution of Gita to the philosophy of life. Although sporadic hints of Karma Yoga can be found in the Upanishads, its full philosophy develops in Gita only.

Many wrongly believe that Acharya Shankara, the greatest commentator of the Upanishads and Gita, was against Karma Yoga. Acharya was against Karma (action) with motive. Keeping in tune with the over all philosophy of Gita, Acharya also prescribes Karma Yoga for all those who are not yet ready for non-dual mode of spiritual practices.

The futility of the Vedic rituals in Self realisation (sl 42-46): Those who are attached to pleasure and power, do not have any firm resolve. They get carried away by the flowery words spoken by the ritualists, and consider the attainment of heaven through ritualistic sacrifices as the highest goal of life.

They do not realise that the practice of Vedic rites does not result in liberation, but in rebirth.

The Vedas deal with three gunas (sattva, rajas, tamas. See chapter XIV). These gunas are the cause of this material universe, and also the cause of the bondage of everything in this universe. He who wants perfection, has to go beyond the three gunas. So, one must go beyond the ritualistic teachings of the Vedas. A spiritually enlightened person transcends the need of the Vedas, although for an unenlightened person the need of the Vedas continues.

Here it is very important to note that although the Vedas are the most sacred scripture of the Hindus, even these are considered subservient to the ultimate knowledge of the Supreme Brahman.

Theory and practice of Karma Yoga (sl 47-53): If a person is desirous of attaining the highest wisdom, then he should take up Karma Yoga, according to which: One is entitled to work, but is not supposed to crave for its fruits. Nor should such a person be ever inactive, nor his actions should result in becoming the further cause for action (i.e. rebirth). Being established in yoga, he should perform all his actions, casting off attachment and remaining even-minded in success and failure. This evenness is called Yoga. In this state one regards himself as a mere instrument in the hands of the Lord, and hence attachment to the results do not touch him. The secret of Karma yoga lies in the complete effacement of one's ego, and identifying oneself fully with God.

Work done with selfish motives is far inferior to actions performed with an evenness of the mind. So, one should take recourse to this evenness. Those who work with an eye on the fruits of their action become wretched, because they always keep calculating about their gains and losses, over which they have no control.

Once a person is established in the evenness of mind, he gets rid of all his good and bad actions. "Therefore, strive for yoga; Yoga is skill (maintaining evenness of mind) in action." The even-minded persons renounce the fruits of action, and thus get freed from the cause of rebirth, which is mukti (liberation).

When a person's intellect becomes free from delusion born of duality, then only does he attain indifference to the words of the scriptures, and goes beyond ritualistic actions that are prescribed in the Vedas. The ordinary mind normally stays perplexed by the various conflicting words of the sacred books regarding duty and non-duty. But when that mind becomes firm and steady in the Self, then it attains Yoga.

Marks of the realised (sl 54- 59): It was then that Arjuna calmed down a bit and expressed his eagerness to know more about what Sri Krishna had just spoken. He wanted to know the nature, character, and the behaviour of a jnani, one who is established in the knowledge of the Self. Lord Krishna then narrated the marks of a Realised person.

A realised person is completely free from all desires, and his Self finds satisfaction only in Itself (i.e. such a person does not depend on the world for his happiness). He is so absorbed in the Supreme Reality that his mind is not perturbed by adversity, nor does he long for happiness, and is free from attachment, fear, and anger. He is not attached to anything, does not get elated at getting the desirable, and does not get disturbed on getting the bad. As a tortoise withdraws its limbs into the shell for protection, so does a man of wisdom withdraws the senses from the sense objects.

The desire for sensual pleasures fades away if one abstains from sense enjoyment, as can be seen in the case of diseased persons who are medically advised to abstain from certain things. But in all such cases the craving for enjoyment continues to be there in a very subtle form. However, in the case of these realised persons, the subtle cravings also disappear completely.

A word of caution for all (sl 60- 63): A perfect yogi restrains all his senses and fixes his mind on the Supreme Lord, who is the innermost Self of all. But a common man is a slave to his senses that hijack them in the long run. So, a person desirous of spirituality should be careful about giving license to his senses. Even a practising yogi must not relax his hold on his senses, since turbulent senses forcibly carry away the mind of even a wise person.

One develops attachment to sense objects by thinking about them again and again, which results in a desire to acquire them. When there is an obstruction in fulfilling that desire, anger is born. An angry person becomes deluded and loses his self control. This results in the loss of smriti (lit. memory. It means the lessons and values learnt from the scriptures and elders). When smriti is lost, one loses his buddhi (the discriminative faculty of the mind that judges the right and the wrong). And a person who has lost his determinative faculty, he is as good as a destroyed person!

As one can see, the destruction of a life is rooted in the simple act of innocent longing. So, a wise person should be careful about not letting his mind go after desires.

Supreme Knowledge and Peace (sl 64-72): The man of self-control moves around the world, enjoying sense objects with his senses under complete control. He himself is free from the dualities of attachment and aversion born

of these interactions, and thus attains serenity of mind. All sorrows are destroyed upon attainment of serenity. The intellect of such a tranquil person soon becomes steady and stays centred on the Self.

The man whose mind is not under his control, has no Self-knowledge, and no contemplation on the Supreme Self either. Without contemplation there can be no peace, and without peace there can be no happiness. This is so because the mind, when not centred in the Self, gets controlled by the wild senses running after their objects. These senses carry away the loose intellect as a storm snatches away a boat from its course. Therefore, only he whose senses are completely withdrawn from the sense objects, can be called a wise person.

The life style of yogis and the ordinary ignorant man is just the opposite. What is night to one, is day to another. A yogi stays conscious of Supreme Reality, but is indifferent to the sense world; whereas a common man delights in the sense world, but is oblivious of the Supreme Reality. As rivers enter the full ocean without creating any disturbance in it, in the same way desires enter a person's mind without causing any disturbance in him. That is when one can be said to have attained peace. A man who still has desires in his heart, is far off from attaining peace. He who gives up all desires, gives up every longing, and is devoid of the sense of 'I' and 'mine', attains peace.

Concluding the chapter, the Lord says that the above description is of the Brahmic state -- the state of superconsciousness. Once a person attains that state, he never again gets deluded. If one can attain this state even at the hour of death, he attains final liberation, and becomes one with Brahman.

The chapter thus discusses the Supreme Reality, Supreme Knowledge, the ways to attain It, its result, and the characteristics of those who have attained it. The next chapters elaborate these.

Chapter III

Karma Yoga

This and the next chapter is an elaboration of the verse *YogasthaH kuru karmani* (II.48).

In the second chapter Lord Krishna talks of Yoga Buddhi (characterised by action, II.47 etc.), and also of Samkhya Buddhi (characterised by Knowledge, II.54-72) as two paths to spirituality. However, the emphasis there is on Samkhya Buddhi, since the Lord says that it can lead to liberation from the worldly cycle of birth and death (mukti), but does not make any such comment regarding Yoga Buddhi. This creates confusion in the mind of

Arjuna who asks, 'Since Knowledge is superior to action, then why do you engage me in this terrible war?'

In response, Sri Krishna expounds the rationale, philosophy, psychology, utility, and the obstacles of Karma Yoga in this chapter. These are being given here in brief.

Why one should work? (Shloka 4-6): The Knowledge of the Self dawns upon those who have Atmajnana nistha (the mental state characterised by a total commitment towards self realisation). This comes only after a person has attained an absolute purity of mind; and this purity comes only to them who have attained the state of non-action (when one is not bound to do anything, nor has he any desire to do anything). This state of total detachment can come only after one has performed sacrifices (yajna) and virtuous actions (punya karma) to get rid of his sinful tendencies.

Normally Jnana Yoga (characterised by detachment and non-action) leads to Atmajnana nistha. Since non-action is an important characteristics of the jnanis, people think that by merely giving up work, they can become jnani. But this is not so. The jnani does not stop working; he only puts a stop to his mind's running after the sense organs during any work. Thus an ordinary person escaping work loses his chance of growth, since escape from work is not the prelude to self realisation, but is the living example of hypocrisy.

How one should work? (Sl 7-9): Under normal conditions, one's organs (ten of them) tend to run after the respective objects in a wild way. When one begins his journey on the path of Karma Yoga, he keeps working intensely, but starts controlling his organs. This is how his organs get detached from the objects, which ultimately leads to a complete detachment from everything. This is best done when one performs only those actions that are dedicated to gods (as if performing a yajna). Sri Krishna says, 'Perform actions for yajna alone; actions other than yajna bind the world' (III.9).

Relation between Vedic gods and present day work (Sl 10-16): The Vedas advise that one must perform sacrificial actions to make the wheel of the universe go, and also advise to offer the return gift to the gods for all that one receives from them in the form of prosperity and well being.

This concept is beautifully harmonised for the people of the non-Vedic period in these verses. The Vedic sacrifices were replaced by Pancha Yajna: Deva Yajna (Rituals, worship, sacrifices etc.), Brahma Yajna (teaching and reciting the scriptures), Pitr Yajna (offerings to the ancestors), Nr Yajna (feeding the hungry etc.), Bhuta Yajna (feeding the animals), and it was advised that people must not stop performing these sacrifices.

Who are those who need not work? (Sl 17-19): Brihadaranayak Upanishad (3.5.1) says that those noble persons who have realised their Self, are free from worldly desires like having a wife etc., and from whom the false perception of the world born due to the play of avidya has ceased, has no duty to perform. He is as free as one can be.

These three shlokas echo the same idea. One who is devoted to Self, is satisfied with the Self, and is content in the Self has no duties to perform, has nothing to gain by doing some work, and has nothing to lose by not doing something.

But even the realised persons keep doing work (Sl 20-26): Although Self realised persons are not obliged to do any work, yet they continue doing work. This is because ordinary people tend to copy what the greats do, so the greats have to be careful not to become inactive. Even God Himself keeps working unceasingly, otherwise the world will come to disorder. Hence it is prescribed that the wise people should work in a detached way exactly in the same way that an unwise person works with attachment. The mind of the unwise should not be unsettled by preaching the philosophy of non-action. This is injurious for the common man, for the society, and also for the world order.

The wise and the unwise worker (sl 27-29): The unwise person is one who identifies himself with the complex of the body-senses-mind-ego. Such a person considers this union as his soul, and hence when he performs any action, he thinks himself as the doer, and thus gets identified with the work and its results.

On the contrary, a wise person is able to distinguish his true 'I'ness from the false I of mind-ego-sense complex, and hence when he works, he knows that it is not he who is working, but it is his senses acting on the respective sense objects.

Converting work into worship (sl 30-32): When a person works with the attitude that 'I work as a servant of God'; and thus gives up the sense of attachment and expectation from the work, he becomes fit to attain the Supreme Knowledge. But those who do not accept this attitude of surrender as correct, they are doomed, since they would take a long time to attain spiritual wisdom.

Obstacles in the path of Karma Yoga (sl 33-40): Lord Krishna explains that people helplessly follow their nature, which is born of the past samskaras (tendencies). These samskaras work out through attachment (rāga), and aversion (dvesa) towards the objects that come one's way during a work. So, if a person makes an effort to control these tendencies of the mind by

following the code of conduct as prescribed by the Varnashrama dharma, then one can slowly stop straying from the path of the good. Affirming this, Sri Krishna says, 'Sva dharme nidhanam shreyaH, paradharmo bhayaavaH' -- it is better to die performing one's prescribed duties than to take up the duties meant for others.

The Lord then elaborates the concept of sin by telling that desires (kāma), which resides in the senses, mind and the intellect, are the root cause of all sinful activities. It is desires that give birth to emotions like anger, which in turn makes people commit sin.

Way to blessedness (sl 41-43): A person desirous of knowledge should realise that the senses are more powerful and superior to the gross body, and the soul is superior to everything. Realising this, one should free one's mind from impurities, and then establish it in the pure knowledge of the Self.

Thus, instead of indulging in wild activities, or staying away from work, a normal aspirant after self realisation should engage oneself in actions that purify one's mind, and from there he should move over to the contemplation of the Self to attain the state of Blessedness.

This is Karma Yoga.

Chapter IV

Jnana Karma Sannyasa Yoga

(The way of renunciation of action in Knowledge, or simply, The Way of Knowledge)

Antiquity of Jnana Yoga (sl 1-3): In the previous two chapters Lord Krishna discusses Jnana Yoga based on renunciation which is attained through Karma Yoga. Thus Jnana Yoga contains both the life of activity (Pravritti) and the life of renunciation (Nivritti) as has been taught in the Vedas. The essence of Vedic teachings is Jnana Yoga, and hence Sri Krishna extols it by talking of its antiquity and also the unbroken tradition in the first three verses.

On Incarnation of God (sl 4-8): The unenlightened Arjuna wonders how Sri Krishna could be the original teacher of Jnana Yoga to the greats of the past when he was born only the other day. In reply Sri Krishna talks of his divine nature and says that He is untouched by dharma and adharma; therefore His birth does not resemble those of ordinary persons. He is born through His own maya, but is untouched by it. He is born to protect the good and to destroy the wicked; and is born in every age whenever there is a decline of dharma -- yada yada hi dharmasya glaniH bhavati Bharata (IV.7).

People perceive God differently and the result of such perception (sl 9-14):
People perceive God differently; and in turn, God rewards them the way they perceive Him. He who sees the Lord beyond birth and death, beyond dharma and adharma, attains God. This divine union is possible only for those who are freed from passion, fear and anger, are absorbed in God, and take refuge in Him alone. But one must not conclude from this that God is partial towards some in favouring His grace. On the contrary, the Lord is beyond such bondages. He simply sets the motion of varnashrama dharma at the beginning of the Creation, and then people follow that dharma (law) according to their mental make up and tendencies. The difference in one's mental make up makes people wish for different results, which are provided by God impartially according to one's acts. Thus, what one gets is not what God gives of His own, but what one deserves from Him.

Characteristics of a true Yogi (sl 15-23): The seekers of Truth always work. In the early stages it is meant to purify oneself, and when he becomes a perfected being, he works for lokasamgraha (to set a model). So, a spiritual person must continue to work because of one of these reasons. Action based on any other consideration is injurious to one's spiritual life.

However, the philosophy of action is highly confusing even for the learned. Even the wise cannot differentiate between karma (action prescribed by scriptures), vikarma (forbidden action), and akarma (renunciation of action). Making a clear distinction between these the Lord says that the real Self of man never gets into action, and that action belongs to the body, mind and the senses. Anyone who realises this fact, sees action (of the mind) in inaction (of the body) of those who out of ignorance refuse to work; and sees inaction (of the Self) in action (of the body and senses) of a realised person. Thus, the decision of Arjuna not to fight is actually action, since he identifies himself with his body and senses, and even though he refused to fight, he would continue to be active mentally. On the other hand, Sri Krishna identifies himself with his soul, so his taking part in the battle is inaction, because the soul never gets into action. Similarly the intense activities of Swami Vivekananda would appear as inaction to a jnani, whereas the idleness of an imperfect monk would appear to be full of action (because this imperfect monk identifies himself with his mind which is active) by a realised person.

This true state of inaction by a sage is reached only when he works without any desire and self will, and whose mind is fixed in the Knowledge of the Self. Such a free sage is satisfied with what he gets of its own, is not swayed by the pairs of the opposites like heat and cold, and is steady in success and failure.

Various kinds of sacrifices (sl 24-32): For a perfected being everything around him is Brahman alone. So, when he performs any action, he sees the instrument of action, the doer, the result, and the action itself as Brahman. This kind of sacrifice does not produce any binding result, and is known as Jnana Yajna (Knowledge sacrifice).

Then there are yogis who make offerings to the gods in various ways, and there are also yogis who offer their self (self conditioned by various identifications, upadhi sahita) in the fire of the Supreme Self (upadhi rahita Brahman). This kind of sacrifice is called daiva yajna.

The Vedas talk of many kinds of yajna, but Gita mentions twelve kind of yajna only, and it is emphasised that anyone who does not perform even one of these sacrifices, he becomes a misfit in this world, and fails to achieve a higher world after death.

In praise of Knowledge (sl 33-42): The Knowledge sacrifice (IV.24) is superior to all other material sacrifices, since all works culminate in Knowledge. To learn about this supreme Knowledge one has to seek for a teacher and then learn from him this exalted Knowledge with due humility, service and faith. It is only then that the delusion of multiplicity of existence vanishes from one's mind, and one sees the presence of all beings in one's Self and also in the Lord (sl 35). Thus is experienced the oneness of the Self and God.

The Lord further says that once a person gets established in the Knowledge of Self, all his sins, samskaras, and actions get destroyed forever. There is no purifier on earth that can equal Knowledge. But, this Knowledge can come only to them who have faith and zeal; people with no faith towards this Knowledge of Self ultimately go to ruin.

Sri Krishna sums up his teachings by saying that action does not bind the person who gives up his actions through Karma Yoga, and hence Arjuna should cut asunder his doubts about the Self with the sword of Knowledge, should dedicate himself to Karma Yoga, and should now get up to take part in the battle.

As one might note, this chapter links up Karma Yoga with Jnana Yoga through letting go of one's identification with the non-Self. To attain anything substantial in this world one has to perform some kind of yajna. Depending on the type of yajna, one's achievements would be great or ordinary. The Lord emphasises that the awareness that 'Brahman alone is all this' is the greatest sacrifice which leads to greatest achievements. To do so, one has to learn to differentiate between the Self and the non-Self by overcoming passions, and then acting in a completely detached way.

Chapter V

Karma Sannyasa Yoga: The Way of Renunciation

This and the next chapter is an elaboration of the verse VihAya kAmAn yaH sarvAn (II.71). Both these chapters discuss the state of non-action and also the nature of true yogis.

In the previous chapters Sri Krishna talked of KarmaYoga and Jnana, and also harmonised them by saying that detached action leads to Jnana. Of these, Yoga is characterised by action, whereas Jnana is characterised by just the opposite, inaction. So, Arjuna wants to know which one of the two: action and inaction, is really superior. In reply, Lord Krishna shows the relationship between action and non-action. It may be noted that this conflict of whether or not a person striving after spirituality should work, has been raging on in India from the Vedic times, and continues till date.

Relation between Karma Yoga and Jnana Yoga (sl 2-5): Lord Krishna says that there is no difference between the path of action, and the path of Knowledge; and that a Karma Yogi who seeks nothing, nor avoids anything is like a perfect sannyasi who by his very nature, renounces everything. However, between an imperfect Karma Yogi (i.e. he who does not work in a detached way), and an imperfect sannyasi (whose renunciation is superficial), the imperfect Karma Yogi is superior, since through intense action a Karma Yogi will one day learn to be detached; but an imperfect sannyasi will never get an opportunity to go through the corrective process. Sincere work is the greatest teacher of a spiritual aspirant.

When renunciation (sannyasa) is aided by Knowledge (of the nature of Self), it is called sAmkhya, and when action (Karma Yoga) is aided with the equanimity of mind (samatva: II.48), it is called Yoga. Since equanimity leads to Knowledge, it is wrong to think that Yoga and sAmkhya are mutually exclusive. For a sincere seeker, both paths are equally good, and lead to the same goal. But for a beginner on the spiritual path, whose senses are not yet under control, the path of action is superior to that of inaction characterised by sannyasa. Anyone who is conscious of the multiplicity around him must go on working.

Arjuna is still under the delusion of multiplicity, so the Lord asks him to get down to work, but also advises him to attain the state of equanimity while at work. The easiest way to reach this state is to offer the results of every action of his to the Lord, or to stay detached from the results of his own action.

How a Karma Yogi becomes a sAmkhya Yogi (sannyasi) (sl 6-7): It is easy to give up the world, but it is difficult to become a sAmkhya yogi (true sannyasi), since it is not easy to acquire the Supreme Knowledge. But if a person

continues to work and offer the fruits of his actions to God, then he become a Jnani and a sAmkhya yogi soon. Such a sannyasi is in constant union with God, has his senses under control, and sees the presence of his own Self in everything.

How a Yogi functions (sl 8-9): A perfect Karma Yogi is as good as a true sannyasi. So when he works, he is conscious that it is not he who is working, but it is his senses (whom he now sees as different from his true Self) that are acting upon the respective objects.

How should a struggling yogi function (sl 10-12): Those yogis who are still struggling to attain perfection should also practise to work the way a perfect yogi works. He should live in the world untouched by its effects, like a lotus leaf stays in water. He should work without any desire for results, so much so that he should not even have the desire for liberation. His only aim of every work should be to attain the purity of his own mind. This purity, which is free of attachment and aversion, leads to Knowledge, which in turn leads to cessation of all activities (sannyasa).

The outlook of a Yogi (sl 13-15): A realised person becomes calm after getting detached from his body and senses, and uses his body as a person uses his house-- living in it, but without any physical identification. Such a person realises that the soul (Lord residing in his heart) does not create the sense of 'I'ness in him, is not the cause of the result of any action, nor does it create any connection between him and the world, and does not accept any virtue or sin of his. In brief, his soul is indifferent to everything that his body and the senses do. It is only the spiritually ignorant who think that the embodied soul does all these.

Knowledge: Its nature and its effects (sl 16-22): The Knowledge of the Supreme Self destroys all ignorance about one's nature and removes every kind of identification of a person. A sannyasi who attains that Knowledge becomes Tadbuddhi (one whose knowledge has reached the Supreme), TadAtmA (one who has realised the Supreme Self as his own Self), TannisTha (one who is not bound by work, and hence permanently established in the Knowledge of the Self), and TatparAyaNa (one whose only shelter is the Supreme Self).

Such a sannyasi becomes completely free from every kind of blemish, and also reaches the stage from where he sees sameness everywhere -- in a learned brahmin, a cow, an elephant, a dog, or an outcaste. These greats overcome the cycle of birth and death even while living (Jivanmukti). Now he does not feel happy when he experiences the good, nor gets distressed on getting the bad. Being a knower of Brahman, he goes beyond delusion, and is now of a steady mind. Freed from the attachments of the external objects, he finds joy only in the Self and is never devoid of it.

Sri Krishna also explains that the enjoyments born of senses are the real source of pain, since they have a beginning and an end. This is the reason why the wise never indulge in sense pleasure.

How to be a Yogi (sl 23-26): He who can withstand the attack of lust and anger alone becomes a perfect yogi and attains the Supreme State even before his death. Such an aspirant has to learn to be happy and satisfied within himself, has to rejoice within, and has to be illumined within. It is then that he attains Brahman and becomes one with It. It is then that all his sins get destroyed, his doubts get dispelled, his senses come under control, and he dedicates himself to the welfare of all.

Introducing Meditation as a means to Liberation (sl 27-29): When a person shuts out all external objects, fixes his mind between his eyebrows, practises pranayama, controls his mind and the senses, and rids himself of all desires that he becomes liberated. He then comes to know God, the Dispenser of fruits of all actions, the Great Lord of all worlds, and the Friend of all beings. And knowing this, he attains Peace.

Thus it may be seen that Lord Krishna takes up various issues, shows the inherent harmony in all of them, and then shows how each of them is a path to perfection. The goal, according to the Lord is Self Knowledge, which may be attained by any of these means.

Chapter VI

Dhyana Yoga: The Way of Meditation

In V.27, the Lord introduced the concept of meditation. This chapter is an elaboration of its techniques and philosophy. In the previous chapters the focus was on the theoretical concepts of spirituality, but in this chapter the discussion is on the concrete methods for spiritual growth.

To attain the Supreme Knowledge one has to be established in meditation. But this is not an easy thing to do. So all those aspirants who are not able to meditate must do work as described in the earlier chapters. It is only by doing this that one becomes fit to take up meditation, which ultimately makes one fit to attain the Supreme Knowledge.

Defining a true sannyasi and a true yogi (sl 1-4): In the earlier chapters, Gita described the two paths for the realisation of the Supreme Knowledge. The first one is sAmkhya in which one sees the Self as all pervasive, pure, eternal etc. Persons who practise this path become Sannyasins, and give up every kind of ritual and sacrifices (hence they are also called niragni, lit. one who does not touch fire).

The second path is that of action/work. The followers of this path are called Yogis, who control their senses completely, and withdraw their mind from the external world. These people ultimately give up work altogether, and are seen as being actionless.

Ordinary aspirants also want to imitate the advanced souls, and so when they take up one of these two spiritual paths, they stop performing rituals and give up their obligatory duties. But this is wrong and disastrous. Sri Krishna makes it very clear that such an attitude is wrong. By merely acquiring the characteristics of the great, one does not become great. To emphasise this point, Sri Krishna says that by merely giving up the rituals one does not become a sannyasi; nor by merely giving up actions, one becomes a yogi. Only he who works in a detached way is both a sannyasi and a yogi.

The Lord sums up these issues by telling that 'He who wants to attain yoga, for him action is the means; but he who has attained yoga, for him serenity (detachment from the senses and works) is the means.'

Self-control and self-mastery (sl. 5-9): A person desirous of spiritual life has to raise himself from the worldliness all around him. This can be done by the control of his lower self (body and senses) by applying self restraint. It is then that one's self (body and senses) becomes a friend of oneself (the soul); otherwise it becomes his own worst enemy and drowns him into more and more worldliness.

A person who has complete control over himself is always filled with satisfaction, is constantly absorbed in the Supreme Self, goes beyond dualities like heat and cold, considers gold and dirt as equally worthless, and has the same kind of regard and respect for everyone.

Way to Dhyana Yoga (sl 10-19): These verses describe the way to samadhi through meditation. To do so, a yogi should stay in solitude and should practise concentration of the mind. For this, he should take a firm seat and practise prAnAyAma. During meditation his body should be erect, the gaze should be fixed at the tip of his nose, should practise brahmacharya, and should think of God constantly. His food, sleep, recreation and exertion at work should be modest. When such a well controlled mind rests in the Self, it is said to have attained Yoga. At that time the mind of a yogi is as steady as the flame of a candle in a windless place. Such a yogi attains Peace that culminates in Nirvana (mukti, freedom).

Uniqueness of Yoga (sl 20-23): Yoga is described here as severance from the contact of pain. In this state the mind becomes quiet, one enjoys the internal joy, his mind never deviates from The Reality, his joy is boundless and is beyond the reach of the senses. Gaining this state, all other gains

seem trivial; and no sorrow seems important. So, this yoga should be practised by all.

Controlling the mind (sl 24-26): One should renounce all desires born of the will (plans, ambitions, expectations), should draw back the senses from every direction, and should struggle to withdraw the mind from the external world and fix it on the Supreme Self. This should be done bit by bit and over a period of time. He should also practise to withdraw the mind from those objects that make it wander away from steadiness.

Results of meditation (27-32): A yogi whose mind has become quiet and whose passions have calmed down, attains Supreme Bliss and becomes a jivanmukta. Such a yogi is freed from sins and enjoys the touch of Brahman and also unbounded bliss with ease. He also now views all things with equal regard, perceives himself in all beings, and sees all beings in himself. This kind of a yogi, who sees God everywhere and sees everything in God, for him God becomes ever present, and he also becomes ever present for God. Furthermore such a yogi lives in God Himself. According to the Lord, one who treats pleasure and pain alike is the best of the yogis.

How to control the unruly mind (33-36): The mind by nature is restless, turbulent, and uncontrollable like the flow of the wind. How to control such a mind, is Arjuna's question.

To this the Lord said that by a constant practise to bring it under control, and through practising detachment, one can slowly learn to control it. This is quite important, since Yoga cannot be attained by an uncontrolled mind, whereas it can be attained by those who strive after it by applying the proper means.

What if one fails in the path of Yoga (37-45): What happens to those aspirants who do not succeed in the path of yoga? Don't they lose this world and also the higher goal of life? To these questions of Arjuna, Sri Krishna replies that he who gets distracted from the path of yoga, is reborn in a good family, and in time comes in touch with the knowledge acquired in his former body. From that point of time he starts his spiritual journey once again. But under no condition does that failed yogi come to a destruction and a total loss. Such a yogabhrasta (fallen from the path of yoga) is led on to the path of spirituality even if he is not aware of his spiritual tendencies, or is even averse to leading a spiritual life due to the interference of the past bad karmas. Thus struggling through many births, one reaches the Supreme Goal.

Superiority of Yoga (46-47): A yogi is superior to those who practise austerities (tapasya), is greater than those who are learned in the scriptures, and is superior to even those who perform actions like rituals and sacrifices. And of all the yogis, the one who worships God with faith, his heart and mind

fixed in God -- he is the best of the yogis. So, the Lord advises Arjuna to be a yogi.

Thus in this chapter the Lord explains that one who has not yet reached the state of practising the Supreme Knowledge, should first get down to work, then practise selfless work to control his mind, and then should get down to meditation. It is meditation that links up the early stages of sadhana with the higher reaches of spirituality.

Chapter VII

Jnana Vijnana Yoga: The Way of Knowledge with Reason

This chapter may also be called 'The Way of Realisation'. It discusses the philosophical nature of God and his relationship with the Creation and the Created.

It is rare for a person to know God (sl 1-3): Sri Krishna says that of thousands of men, rare a few strive for perfection, and of these perfect ones (those who are striving for liberation are also considered to be siddha, a perfect one) perchance someone realises God. Hence the Lord wants to teach Arjuna both jnana (knowledge about God) and vijnana (experience of God realisation), knowing which one becomes a sarvajna (for whom nothing else remains to be known).

Jnana means the awareness that God exists and that He is the inmost spirit of all. This can be acquired through scriptural studies and reasoning based on them. Vijnana means the realisation of God in oneself and in all beings, and to act accordingly. Sri Ramakrishna says:

"He who has merely heard of milk is 'ignorant'. He who has seen milk has 'knowledge'. But he who has drunk milk and been strengthened by it has attained vijnana.

"The awareness and conviction that fire exists in wood is jnana, knowledge. But to cook rice on that fire, eat the rice, and get nourishment from it is vijnana. To know by one's inner experience that God exists is jnana. But to talk to Him, to enjoy Him as Child, as Friend, as Master, as Beloved, is vijnana. The realization that God alone has become the universe and all living beings is vijnana."

Nature of God (sl 4-5): God has two forms/nature: the lower and the higher. The lower form consists of eight things: Avyakta/Prakriti (mentioned as ahamkara in Gita); mahat (mentioned as buddhi here), ahamkara (mentioned here as manas), and the five elements (which in turn give birth to 5 gross elements, and the 11 organs). This corresponds to the elements of Samkhya philosophy.

In addition to His lower form, God has a higher form also which is the Indwelling Spirit by which the universe is sustained. This is also known as parā prakriti (lit. superior Nature), and being the Spirit form of God, it is superior to His matter form.

Relation between God and his Creation (sl 6-12): The two forms of God discussed earlier are the source of all beings, and He Himself is the origin of the entire Creation and also of its dissolution. Actually, Prakriti has no power to create things or dissolve the created things of its own. Only when God initiates the process that Creation proceeds. Thus God is higher than everything else in the universe, and is like a necklace on which everything of the universe is strung like gems. He is all that is noble, good, virtuous, powerful etc. in the universe. And, whatever is there in the universe, is born of the three gunas (sattva, rajas, tamas), is from the Lord Himself, and is in the Lord itself. But, the Lord is beyond these, and is the controller of all these.

This last statement implies that the universe is only an appearance superimposed by maya on the Lord, as a mirage is superimposed on a desert. The existence of a mirage depends entirely on the desert, but the desert is not dependent on the mirage for anything. And, as the water of mirage cannot soak the desert, similarly none of the properties of the universe can touch God.

Nature of Ignorance (sl 13-15): God is nitya-suddha-buddha-mukta (eternal, pure, conscious/intelligent, free); is the Self of all beings, and is the saviour of all from the cycle of birth and death. It is unfortunate that people cannot recognise Him the way He is because they are deluded by the three gunas that constitute Prakriti/Maya (The Nature). These three gunas produce attachment, aversion, delusion etc. in the minds of all, and do not allow people to know God and His true nature which is beyond the gunas. Although it is difficult for people to overcome Maya, which is of God, and hence divine; but, those seekers who take refuge in the Lord, succeed in going across the ocean of maya. On the other hand, those who are evil doers -- deluded and meanest of people, their understanding gets robbed by maya. These people are endowed with traits like cruelty, violence, telling lies etc. which belong to people with Asuri nature (to be discussed in chapter XVI), and fail to take shelter in the Lord.

The Fortunate ones (sl 16-19): Four types of virtuous men worship the Lord: the distressed, the seeker after divine knowledge, those who want enjoyment, and the illumined souls. Of these four categories of devotees, the Jnanis (illumined ones) are the best. God is supremely dear to the jnanis, and the jnanis are the dear ones of God. This is because they are the Self of each other.

People who seek God for whatever reason are indeed noble (even in distress not everyone goes to God), but the jnanis are the very Self of the Lord. It is rare to come across a jnani who sees God in everything, for, this Knowledge comes to a seeker after many births of spiritual struggle.

Worshipping other gods (sl 20-23): Not everyone understands the nature and form of God, so common men go on worshipping minor deities, including trees and stones to have their wishes fulfilled. This happens because they lose their discrimination due to their desires and ignorance. The Lord says that even such forms of worship, if performed with faith, get deepened by His grace, and the devotee finally obtains the result of his worship. But, even in such cases the Lord alone bestows the fruit of worship, since He alone is the dispenser of the fruit of every action. However, such devotees of limited mind who worship minor deities attain those deities only, whereas the worshippers of the Supreme God attain Him.

Ignorance about God's nature (sl 24-27): People disregard God because they think that He also is impelled by His past karma and is born like an ordinary person. Thus not knowing the supreme nature of God/ Sri Krishna as immutable and transcendent, people go to worship minor deities. This ignorance comes in the mind of a common man due to the Lord's maya which is born of the gunas, and it is thus that the world fails to know God as eternal and unborn. The Lord, being the controller of maya, knows every being of past, present and future, but they cannot know Him due to their ignorance. All beings are deluded due to the pairs of opposites which in turn arise from their desires and dislikes.

The Blessed seekers (sl 28-30): Those devotees who are free of sin, are of noble deeds, are free from delusion, worship the Lord, and take refuge in Him -- they realise Brahman. They come to know about the individual soul (the Divinity that is the reality underlying the individual soul), and they also come to know all about the subtle ways of action. Those who know the Lord to be the One that underlies all the elements, and know Him to be the One that underlies all the gods, and know Him to be the One that sustains all the sacrifices, their consciousness of the Lord remains undiminished even at the time of death. They are the blessed souls.

The Process of Creation according to Vedanta

The process of creation has been described variously by the different philosophical systems of the Hindus. However, the most commonly accepted view is that Prakriti (nature) creates this universe in the presence of the Purusha, who is the Conscious principle behind every creation. Purusha is

identified variously with God, Narayana, Vishnu, Saguna Brahman, Brahma and others, but never with Brahman, the Absolute.

Purusha does not get into the act of creation directly, but gets it done through Prakriti, which is insentient (jada). Vedanta calls it Maya, while many others call it Shakti (the inseparable divine power of God).

Prakriti is composed of three gunas (which mean strands/ qualities, but they may be very very fine particles): Sattva (lightness etc.), Rajas (activity etc.), Tamas (inertness etc.). They always stay together and try to overpower each other. When creation begins, their balance is disturbed. This results in evolution as mentioned below:

Prakriti/ Pradhana/ Avyakta / Avyākṛita (also Ajnana, Maya, Shakti) is composed of the three gunas => Mahat (Cosmic Intelligence) => Ahamkara (Cosmic Ego) => 5 sukshma bhuta / tanmatra => 5 Sthulabhuta / 5 Mahabhuta (gross elements) => 10 indriya (bodily organs) + 1 mind. These are the 24 tattva (elements).

Properties of Tanmatras

The 5 sukshamabhuta (subtle elements) are born one after the other successively: Ahamkara => Akasa (ether) --> Vayu (air) --> Agni (Fire) --> Apah --> Bhumi (earth). Each of these elements has its special characteristic which gets manifested when it is born: Ether -- shabda (sound), Air -- sparsa (touch), Fire -- rupa (form), Water -- rasa (taste), Earth -- gandha (smell).

These 5 elements are also known as Apanchikṛita (uncompounded elements), since these are in their pure form and have sattva, rajas, tamas present in them in varying proportion. Of these, Akasa has predominance of sattva, whereas the next elements (born successively) have a gradual increase of rajas and tamas, and finally bhumi has predominance of tamas. However, since these elements are not yet compounded, they are not capable of creating the universe as we see it.

The mind is born of the sattva particles of all the five elements taken together (Vedantasara: II.70), while jnanendriya (the 5 organs of Perception) are born of the sattva particles of individual elements, karmendriya (the organs of action) are born of the rajas particles of the subtle elements, and the five prana (vital forces) are born of the rajas particles of all the five subtle elements taken together.

When pure consciousness at the individual level gets covered by ignorance, consisting of the three gunas, it is called Karana sharira. The sukshma shariara / Linga Sharira (the subtle body of all beings) is made of 5

tanmatras, and have seventeen component parts: the ten organs of perception and action + manas (mind) + buddhi (intellect) + 5 prana (the 5 vital forces of the body).

Properties of Mahabhuta/Sthulabhuta

The 5 tanmatras combine with each other to produce the compounded elements, known as sthulabhuta (gross elements). Each gross element contains 1/2 of the main subtle element, and 1/8th each of the other subtle elements. Thus gross Akasa = 1/2 of subtle akasa + 1/8 subtle vayu + 1/8 subtle agni + 1/8 subtle aapah + 1/8 subtle bhumi. Other gross elements are produced in the like manner.

Because each gross element has 1/2 of a particular subtle element, it is known by the same name: sky, air, fire, water, and earth. These elements should not be confused with the ordinary fire, water, air etc. that we see around us; rather what we see around us are born of these gross elements.

The sthulabhuta contain the characteristic of the elements from which they got evolved. Thus ether manifests only sound; fire manifests sound, touch, and form; and earth manifests sound, touch, form, taste, and smell. The heavens, hells, the earth, the bodies (including human) etc. are born of these 5 gross elements. Everything that we see, feel, experience around us are also born of them only.

The table given below details some aspects of creation.

Subtle Elements =>	Akasa	Vayu	Agni	Aapah	Bhumi
Properties	Shabda (sound)	Sparsha (touch)	Roopa (form/colour)	Rasa (taste)	Gandha (smell)
Organs of Perception	Ear	Skin	eyes	tongue	nose
Deities	Dik (Quarters)	Vayu	Surya (Sun)	Varuna	Two Aśvins
Organs of Action	Speech	Acceptance	Walking	Excretion	Procreation
Deities	Agni	Indra	Visnu	Yama	Prajapati
Prana (vital forces)	Prāna	Apāna	Vyāna	Udāna	Samāna

The Mind

Aspects of Mind	Manas	Buddhi	Chitta	Ahamkara
Functions	Cogitative	determinative	data collection	identification
Deities	Chandrama	Brahma	Vishnu	Shiva

The 5 Kosas (the coverings on the soul)

According to Vedanta, Atman alone exists, but due to the divine Ignorance, it apparently gets covered by 5 kosa (sheaths): Annamaya, Pranamaya, Manomaya, Vijnanamaya, Ananadamaya.

Anandamaya Kosa is the Pure Consciousness associated with avidya (ignorance))

Vijanamaya Kosa is the buddhi (intellect) + 5 organs of perception

Manomaya Kosa is the manas (mind) + 5 organs of perception

Pranamaya Kosa is the 5 pranas (vital forces) + 5 organs of action

Annamaya Kosa is the gross body (Sthula sharira) of an individual.

Vijanamaya Kosa, Manomaya Kosa, and Pranamaya Kosa constitute the sukshma sharira (the subtle body) which accompanies the jiva (soul) during transmigration after death. Anandamaya Kosa is the Karana sharira.

Jiva and its various conditions

Names of Bodies	Karana Sharira (Causal Body)	Sukshma Sharira (Subtle body)	Sthula Sharira (Gross body)
Identified with:	Dreamless sleep	Dream state	Waking state
Name of the embodied soul	Prājna	Taijas	Viśva
Name of the aggregate of souls	Íśvara (God)	Hiranyagarbha / Sutrātmā / Prāna	Vaiśvānara

Chapter VIII

Tarak Brahma Yoga: The Way of the Imperishable Brahman

The chapter begins with an explanation of certain terms used in the last two verses of the previous chapter. In the process, the Lord also discusses the philosophy and the dynamics of liberation through stages by the process of meditation. It also shows the way to the Imperishable (akshara) Brahman -- the Real amidst all unreality.

The seven terms explained (sl 1-5): It is important for a sadhaka to understand these terms so that he can differentiate the Imperishable (akshara) from the perishable (kshara) to move ahead in his spiritual journey without getting stuck up.

1. Brahman -- It is the Imperishable Supreme Reality that rules over everything forever.
2. Adhyātma/ Svabhāva -- The Reality (tattva) that exists in everyone as the inmost Self. In truth, the Adhyātma is Brahman itself.
3. Karma -- The process of making the offering during a sacrifice is Karma. It requires giving up (in the form of pouring the offerings), and is responsible for the general welfare of the world. The rains, plants, food, animals, men etc. are produced due to this Karma. It should not be confused with ordinary work, or the law of karma.
4. Adhibhūta -- Every form of matter has an origin and dissolution, is different from the non-perishable Atman, and yet dependent on It for its existence, and is known as adhibhuta. The whole range of products of Prakriti is perishable (kshara), and hence is adhibhuta.
5. Adhidivata -- (lit. the entity existing in the divine plane.) This is Hiranyagarbha, who resides in the Solar Orb and sustains the organs of all creatures.
According to Vedanta, every sense organ has a presiding deity that makes it function. The deity of a particular sense organ is also present at the cosmic level in the external world. Thus the sun-god is in the solar orb and is also the presiding deity of vision in beings. All such deities are the manifestation of Purusha (the Universal Self) in His subtle aspect (Hiranyagarbha).
6. Adhiyajna -- God sustains all the Vedic sacrifices and is called adhiyajna. Also, all the bodily functions are like sacrifices (explained in chapter IV), so, as the Inner controller of the body, God is the adhiyajna who directs all the physical functions of the body.
7. How is God attained at the time of death -- He who remembers God at the time of death, he attains God.

Ascent of a yogi after death (sl 6-10): What a person thinks at the last moments of his life determines his next birth. This means that one should always be absorbed in the thoughts of God, otherwise he won't be able to remember God at the time of his death. This kind of absorption is possible only through a constant practise.

When a person dies thinking of Purusha, he reaches the solar orb. This Purusha is also called Saguna Brahman, who is the Ruler, the Dispenser of all, subtler than an atom, beyond comprehension and beyond any kind of delusion. The abode of this Purusha is the highest manifestation of Brahman in the relative plane and is attained by the yogis who meditate on Him -- the Omniscient and the Primal Being.

Meditation on the Supreme Brahman through Aum (sl 11-15): Now is described the state of the Supreme Brahman who is Imperishable. This state is attained by the chosen few who have self control, are free from dualities, have conquered their passions, and who constantly meditate on the Lord. At the time of death, these yogis withdraw their senses from everything else, focus their mind only on God who resides within the heart, and give up their bodies while uttering Aum. These high souled men reach the Lord and become freed from the cycle of birth and death, since they have attained the highest perfection.

Rebirth for the imperfect (sl 16-19): Excepting for the chosen few (described in sl 11-15), everyone else gets reborn after death. Even those who by the virtue of their meritorious deeds reach Brahmaloaka (the highest heavens ruled by Brahma) have to be reborn after a time. It is believed that during a day of Brahma (9,58,81,60,000 human years) the inhabitants of that heaven enjoy it, but during Brahma's night (same span of time) they all vanish, to reappear again during His next day. Thus the cycle continues with the same beings getting merged at night and then reappearing at daytime as per their karma. No one who has not attained the Lord keeps on evolving and involving in this cyclic process.

Beyond Rebirth (sl 20-22): The night of Brahma is the seed state of all beings from where they spring to life at the daytime. Beyond the cyclic life of the beings of Brahmaloaka is the Eternal Being who does not perish even when everything else perishes. That state of the Eternal Being is Imperishable and is the Ultimate Goal (Parama gati) for everyone. Those who reach that state, never again come back. That is the Abode of the Lord which can be attained only by those noble souls who are completely devoted to that Supreme Purusha, the Lord.

Two paths of ascent after death (sl 23-26): The noble souls who have attained Self Knowledge become free instantly, so there is no more coming or going for them. But the remaining yogis ascend to higher heavens through one of the two paths: 1. Those who meditate on Saguna Brahman (God with form) take the solar path to reach Brahmaloaka. At the end of the cycle of Brahma (His hundred years, 30,91,73,76,00,00,000 human years), they get liberated. 2. Those who perform various meritorious work like ritualistic actions, sacrifices, charity and other noble activities, take the lunar path, enjoy in various heavenly spheres and then are reborn on this earth to continue with their spiritual journey.

These two paths are eternal, and are taken by the yogis only. The ordinary beings who do not practise spirituality can never take these noble paths.

The glory of Yoga (sl 27-28): No yogi who understands the terms explained in the beginning of the chapter, and also knows about these two paths, can ever get deluded. Such a yogi transcends everything (studying the Vedas, performing sacrifices, austerities etc.) that produces any kind of result, and thus reaches the Supreme Abode -- the Primal cause of everything.

Swami Vivekananda in one of his his letters to E.T. Sturdy has discussed the two paths mentioned here, and has harmonised them with Advaita. Interested readers may go through that also.

Chapter IX

Raja Vidya Raja Guhya: The way of Royal Knowledge and Royal mystery

In praise of Raja Vidya (sl 1-3): The previous chapter talked of fixing the mind (dharana) in a particular way to attain liberation (VIII. 11-15). But that kind of difficult sadhana is not possible for people who are not great yogis. So in this chapter the Lord talks of a direct and easier way of attaining Knowledge (Brahma Jnana) which releases one from the bondage of the world. This path should be practised by anyone who has faith in this dharma (the conviction in the existence of God, soul and immortality) to attain peace and happiness. But, men without faith in this dharma keep suffering.

The unparalleled wisdom (sl 4-6): All things of this universe are pervaded by the Supreme Lord in His unmanifested form (as Atman/Consciousness), they all exist in Him, but He does not exist in them (see VII. 4-5). It is like the mirage existing in the desert, but the desert not existing in the mirage. And yet the divine mystery is that the beings of the universe do not dwell in Him (note the contradiction. Will be explained later).

The Lord's Spirit is the support and the source of all beings and things, but It does not dwell in them because there is no real contact between Him and the objects of the world. The Lord is neither the container nor the contained, since there is no duality of any kind in Him. The concept of the container and the contained, or the cause and the effect belongs to the realm of maya, but the Lord is beyond maya, and hence appears to be the cause and support of everything. In reality He is always one and without a second. This is the divine and eternal mystery. The relationship between God and His Creation is like that of the mighty wind blowing everywhere, but staying in Akasa (ethereal space) without affecting it in any way. Just in that way objects stay in God without contaminating Him in anyway, because from His standpoint the whole creation is illusory.

Creation and God (sl 7-10): The whole process of creation, preservation and dissolution is due to the Lord's maya. Maya (Apara prakriti, see ch. VII) projects out of itself all the names and forms at the time of creation, whereas Consciousness (Para prakriti) endows them with life. At the end of the cycle the names and forms of the manifested universe go back into the seed state and remain merged in Prakriti. The Prakriti itself remains in a state of equilibrium of the three gunas. At the beginning of the new cycle, the balance of Prakriti is lost and the creation begins afresh.

The process of cyclic creation is maintained by the Lord through the control of His own Prakriti, and all beings who had not got liberation in the previous cycle, get manifested helplessly once again under the sway of maya. This creation happens due to the mere presence of the Lord. It should be understood that the Lord never creates the beings the way we create things. Creation must serve some purpose, whereas the Lord has no purpose of his own that needs to be served. The universe is perceived as being in time and space, but from the standpoint of Reality, nothing other than the Lord Himself exists. Creation belongs to Prakriti who starts evolving by the mere nearness of the Lord.

Since the creation belongs to maya, God never gets bound by the inequality of the created beings. The Lord is totally free from any desire, purpose, motive or agency in creation, hence He remains unaffected by everything of the universe. In the same way, anyone working without any motive becomes free, the way the Lord is free.

In these verses there is an apparent contradiction, but the fact is that these verses lead from the gross to the subtle understanding. The Lord begins by stating that He projects at the beginning of the cycle, and that Prakriti is only an instrument in His hand; He next says that He is unaffected because He is neutral in the matters of creation; and lastly He says that He does nothing and that Prakriti, animated by His nearness, produces the universe. This system of leading a person from the gross to the subtle is called Arundhati Nyaya.

Only the noble souls can know God (sl 11-15): From time to time the Lord assumes the human form so that men may attain a godly nature. But the ignorant people disregard Him when He is in the human form. This happens because people are not aware of His higher nature as the Supreme Lord of all beings. Such people are vile and ungodly, and cherish vain hopes, perform vain actions, pursue vain knowledge, and are devoid of proper judgement, since they deny the Lord and instead perform this and that action.

On the other hand, the noble souls, endowed with the divine nature, worship only the Lord. They know Him to be Imperishable and the origin of all beings, and worship Him with love, steadfastness and by glorifying Him. Many of them perform Jnana Yajna (see chapter IV), others worship Him as the One, or worship Him as one of the various divinities.

God is everything (sl 16-19): The Lord is the inmost self of everything. He is the sacrifice, the worship, its hymn, its accessories etc. He is the Father of universe (the efficient cause), the Mother (the material cause), the Grandfather (since He is the cause of the manifest world and also is the cause of its cause), and the Sustainer (He sustains the universe through the Law of Karma). He is Aum the purifier, the knowable, and the essence of the Vedas. He is the Goal and the Support, the Lord and the Witness (He is all knowing and ever present, so nothing is hidden from Him), the ultimate Abode and Refuge. He gives heat, He gives rains and also holds them back, He is immortality and also death in this world, He is being (manifested) and also non-being (the unmanifested). It is thus that the devotees of the Lord regard Him in various ways and follow different methods of worship.

The wheel of birth and death (sl 20-25): The followers of rituals and sacrifices as described in the Vedas, go to the heavens, enjoy there, and then are reborn. Thus they are subject to the vicious cycle of birth and death. But those who worship the Lord, meditate upon Him, and are ever devoted to Him, for them the Lord Himself carries what they lack, and preserve what they already have.

The Lord is the ultimate enjoyer of all sacrifices, so when people worship other deities and gods, those worship also reach Him only. But since such misguided people wish to have various desires fulfilled and have different goals to reach, they fail to get liberation even though they labour hard. Thus, those who worship gods go to gods, those who worship ancestors go to ancestors and likewise. Naturally they all get reborn. Only those who worship the Lord go to Him and are not born again.

The Gracious Lord (sl 26-34): These verses describe the grace of God towards those who worship Him with love. Their simplest offerings to the Lord, like water, leaves, flowers etc. is accepted by Him with kindness. So one should offer everything that he does, eats, performs and gifts. It is thus that one becomes free from the bondage of action, and reaches Him. This method of offering the fruits of one's action is called Sannyasa yoga, which combines the path of action (performing duties, hence Karma Yoga), and giving up (offering the results, hence Samkhya yoga). So this is a great and noble method.

The Lord is same towards all beings, but those who worship Him with devotion, they are the chosen ones since they are in Him, and He is in them. This is not out of any partiality, but it is because their Self is one. The Lord is so gracious that even the most wretched and the sinful person soon becomes righteous if he has devotion towards Him, and ultimately attains eternal peace. The devotees of the Lord never perish even if they be sinful, or be of sinful birth -- they all attain the Supreme Goal. Since it is so, then what to say of the noble souls and the sages who are devoted to God! So, everyone who has got a human body in this transitory universe should worship the Lord by regarding Him as the Supreme Goal. Further, one should fix his mind in Him, be devoted to Him and dedicate himself to Him. It is thus that a person reaches Him.

Chapter X

Vibhuti Yoga: The Yoga of Divine Manifestation

Why this chapter (sl 1-3): The seventh and the ninth chapter discuss in brief the essential nature and the glories of God. This chapter describes them in detail. God is the source of gods (like Indra, Varuna etc.) and also of sages, so it is not possible even for them to know Him unless He Himself reveals His nature to them. When a person realises God to be Unborn, without a beginning, and as the Supreme Lord, he becomes freed from all sins.

God -- The Supreme Lord (sl 4-8): Every creature and human being has various qualities and attributes which distinguish one from the other. These attributes like intelligence, knowledge, wisdom, pleasure, pain, birth, death, fame, charity etc. have God as their cause and basis. Also, in the beginning of the Creation the Lord Himself created the seven sages (Bhrigu, Marichi, Atri, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratubh and Vasistha are the seven sages who were created mentally by Prajapati, the first father.) and the four Manus (SāvarNi, Dharma SāvarNi, Daksha SāvarNi, SāvarNa) were created by the Lord Himself mentally. Anyone who realises this divine glory of God, he gets established in Yoga which is characterised by an unshakeable devotion towards God. Such a wise person knows that God is the origin of all, and that all things evolve from Him.

It should be noted here that according to Hinduism the first created beings have their origin in the mind of God. The creation by God is a mental act which is followed by the so-called physical acts of the created beings.

The Blessed Devotees (sl 9-11): The devotees who realise God as Supreme, their thoughts, action and life get centred around Him only. They find delight and satisfaction only in glorifying Him and singing His name. To such devotees God bestows the Yoga of understanding (Buddhi Yoga) out of sheer

compassion, and He also destroys the darkness of ignorance of their hearts by igniting the lamp of Knowledge. This ignorance is both the beginningless avidya, and its effect in the form of illusory perception.

Since phenomenal/worldly knowledge belongs to avidya itself, it is only the Light of the Lord that can destroy the vicious ignorance. The Divine Light shines through the intellect (buddhi), hence this form of sadhana is called Buddhi Yoga, which alone is capable of destroying Ignorance. Thus it is only through the grace of the Lord that one can transcend maya.

Arjuna wants to know about the glories of the Lord (sl 12-18): Arjuna now prays to Sri Krishna, accepting Him as the Lord -- the Supreme Brahman, Supreme Abode and Supreme Holiness. He now wants to hear from the Lord of His divine powers, divine glories, and the way to attain His grace.

The Divine manifestations of the Lord (sl 19-38): These 20 shlokas list some of the prominent things of this world and say that the Lord Himself has become all of them. The fact is that the Lord Himself has become everything, but a common man adores the good and the great, hence this listing has been narrated by the Lord to teach that whatever is exceptionally good in this world, is the Lord Himself.

The Lord, seated in the hearts of all creatures, is the beginning, the middle, and the end of all beings. He is the best of everything: Vishnu among the Adityas, sun among the lights, Sama Veda among the Vedas, mind among the senses, intelligence in the living beings, Aum among the words, Japa among the sacrifices, Himalaya among the immovables, Vajra among the weapons, lion among the beasts, Gayatri among the metres, Agrahayana among the months, spring among the seasons, Vyasa among the sages, Arjuna among the Pandava brothers etc. He is also the all seizing Death, prosperity, glory, fortune, speech, memory, etc.

The Lord's manifestations are infinite (sl 39-42): The Lord sums up His elaboration by telling that there is no being, whether moving or unmoving, that can exist without Him (anything without Him would be void, shunya). So, what has been narrated earlier is only a partial description of the Lord's glories, for, whatever glorious, or beautiful, or mighty being exists anywhere -- that has sprung from a tiny spark of the Lord's splendour. Not only that, this whole universe stands supported by a small fragment (ekamsena) of the Lord.

Meditation on Lord can be done in one of the three ways -- rupa chintana (meditating on the form), lila chintana (meditating on the episodes of His life), and guna chintana (meditating on His Divine qualities). This chapter belongs to guna chintana, and anyone who practises this form of yoga, also reaches the same state where a Jnani reaches. Hence the importance of the chapter.

Chapter XI

Viswarupa Darshana: The Yoga of the Vision of the Lord's Cosmic Form

The previous chapter focusses on guna chintana (contemplation on the Lord's qualities). This chapter describes the Cosmic Form of the Lord, and belongs to roopa chintana (contemplation on the form of God). Both these chapters are great aids to meditation. In addition, this chapter excels in its poetic beauty.

Arjuna wishes to see Sri Krishna's Cosmic Form (sl 1-4): The Lord in His Cosmic Form (as opposed to His Formless aspect) always possesses the six divine qualities: Jnana (Knowledge), Aishwarya (Sovereignty), Shakti (Power), Bala (Strength), Virya (Energy), and Teja (Vigour). This form of God is also known as Iswara form on which the devotees love to meditate. Arjuna wishes to see this form of the Lord which is more concrete to him than the form in which the Lord Creates the universe, controls all, is the Dispenser of the results of action etc., and yet continues to be unchanging, impartial, undisturbed and detached (as described in earlier chapters).

Arjuna gets the divine eyes to see the Cosmic Form of the Lord (sl 5-8): Sri Krishna is about to reveal His Cosmic Form which comprises the whole universe of the moving, unmoving, the past, present and future, the Time itself, gods, sages, divine beings -- all concentrated in His body. It would be the vision of the One in the many, and the many in One. It would explain and justify the apparent contradictions of the relative world and reconcile the famous opposites of the spiritual world -- justice and mercy, fate and free will, suffering and divine love.

The vision of God in all, and all in God removes all doubts and perplexities that cloud a person before the divine revelation. After that he is able to see the relation and unity in the apparent diversity of the universe, and spontaneously surrenders to the will of God. He is then also able to see the most hateful and the terrible things of the world as the divine manifestation of the Lord. It is only then that the blessed person accepts the world with joy and performs every task as the Lord's work.

However, this kind of vision is not possible with the ordinary human eyes which are meant to perceive the multiplicity of this world. So, the Lord gives divine eyes to Arjuna so that he can see the One behind the multiple.

A glimpse of the Cosmic Form (sl 9-14): The Iswara form of the Lord was now revealed before Arjuna and Sanjay (who had been narrating the events of the war to the blind king, Dhritarashtra). The splendour of the Lord was like the radiance of a thousand suns bursting forth at once in the sky. His many faces and many eyes were on every side; His ornaments, weapons, garlands,

perfumes etc. were all divine, awe inspiring, resplendent and limitless. In that person of God, Arjuna saw the whole universe with its manifoldness (gods, men, ancestors etc.) gathered into One.

The sight overwhelmed Arjuna who then bowed his head and folded his palms in reverence to the Lord and addressed Him with hairs standing on end.

The Terrifying Cosmic Form (sl 15-31): What Arjuna saw and described aloud was both benign and terrifying. He saw Brahma (the creator God), the divine sages, all the gods, the divine serpents and a host of other divine beings in Him. The Lord had innumerable arms, faces, eyes and bellies. His form extended on every side, covering every space and looked infinite in every sense. He was a mass of radiance with a divine crown, mace and disc. Arjuna then prayed, 'You are the Imperishable (akshara), the Supreme Being to be realised, the Supreme Support of the universe, the eternal Guardian of the Eternal Dharma, and also the Eternal Being (XI.18).'

The Lord had the sun and the moon for his eyes, His face was like a blazing fire, His form filled all space, everyone trembled with fear at His terrible form and, the hosts of gods and celestial beings were entering into Him with folded hands out of fear. All the divine beings stood trembling before His great form which had many mouths, eyes, arms, thighs, feet bellies and tusks.

Arjuna was terrified at this sight. He saw His opponents including Bhishma, Drona, Karna and others, and also the warrior chiefs of his own side entering the Lord's terrible mouths in which many were caught between His teeth. Like many rivers rushing towards the ocean, or like moths rushing into a blazing fire, the creatures were entering the terrifying mouths of the Lord towards their destruction. This terrified and troubled Arjuna who cried out in pain to the Lord to have mercy. He wanted to know who Sri Krishna was (Sri Krishna had been Arjuna's friend, at the same time he stood before Arjuna in His terrible form).

The implications of the vision (sl 32-34): Hinduism accepts God in totality; He is the Creator, Preserver and also the Destroyer. This is the reason why Hinduism has no need for a Devil who would undo all the good that God creates. Since every new creation requires the destruction of the old, so Hinduism accepts Destruction as an essential feature of God, and hence sees Time as a manifestation of God. For the same reason Hinduism has equal reverence for Brahma (the creator God) and Kali (the Destroyer).

The Lord says that He is the world destroying Time, and is currently engaged in slaying the warriors. Even without Arjuna all those warriors were going to die. So the best thing for Arjuna was to stand up in the battlefield and win glory by becoming an instrument in the hands of the Lord (Nimitta mātram bhava savyasāchin), since the warriors have already been destroyed by the Lord (XI.33).

This verse explains that none can stop the divine will. Sri Krishna reminds Arjuna that he has been appointed by the Lord as His human instrument on account of his past good karma. The reward for his present actions have also been determined by the divine will in the form of glory for him. Now he only has to make his own will one with the divine will by performing his set duties. Elaborating this further in the XVIIIth chapter, the Lord would say 'your nature would make you fight'. Thus the best thing for a person is to perform his duties according to varnashrama dharma, and surrender oneself to the divine will. This is how the destiny is fulfilled.

It is through this glimpse into the nature of reality that the Lord encourages Arjuna to give up weakness of every kind and fight to kill, since they are already dead.

Arjuna's prayer to the Lord (sl 35-46): Arjuna then broke into a prayer in praise of the Lord and said that He was the Primal Cause even of Brahma (since He creates Brahma), the Infinite, Abode of the universe, the Imperishable, the Supreme, Being and non being (Relatively speaking, Existence and non existence are the two conditions of God's manifestation), the Knower and also that which is to be known, and the Ultimate Goal. He was the Wind, Death, Fire, Moon, Varuna (the famous Vedic gods), the Prajapati (the sire of all living beings) and the Great grandfather (the father of Brahma).

Arjuna was so emotionally charged that he started making namaskara (salutations) on all sides of the Lord, and begged to be apologised for his casual behaviour with Sri Krishna in the past, and finally prayed to the Lord to assume his former manifestation which was tender, benign and loving. It is this meditating aspect (the humanised form of the Lord) that reassures and soothes the devotees, and hence Arjuna wanted to see that old form only.

The Lord assumes his normal Form (47-55): The Lord says that Arjuna is lucky in having seen the Cosmic Form of the Lord, since no human endeavour (the study of scriptures, performance of sacrifices etc.) can help one to have this vision. And then the Lord assumed his human form which had a graceful shape, and comforted the terrified Arjuna by saying that he was indeed the blessed one, since even the gods cannot see this Universal Form of the Lord. It is only the devotee who does His work (dedicates all

works to the Lord without seeking any fruit for himself), looks on Him as the Supreme Goal, is devoted to Him, is without any attachment or aversion -- that he succeeds in having His vision. It is then that He reaches God and enjoys Him uninterruptedly till He lives, and becomes one with Him after his death.

This chapter is extremely important for the devotees of the Lord. It provides a lot of material to meditate upon, and contemplate upon.

Chapter XII

Bhakti Yoga: The Way of Divine Love

In Gita, two modes of worship have been discussed: the worship of the Cosmic Form and the worship of the Absolute Brahman. The former is meant for the beginners who presuppose a distinction between the Lord and the individual soul. The Lord is the saviour of these individual souls.

The other method of worship is meant for jnanis who do not see any distinction between the Lord and the individual soul, so they do not depend on any external being for their liberation, since all that is, is the Self alone. These two paths of worship are different, though ultimately they bring the same result of liberation to their followers.

The followers of the Impersonal aspect of God are called Jnanis, and the devotees of God with form are called bhaktas. Jnanis see that he alone exists in the universe as Atman; whereas a bhakta sees that He alone exists in the universe as God. However, in both these cases the personal ego and the petty self is crushed to make room for the Universal Spirit.

This chapter synthesises the two paths taken by these two class of spiritual aspirants: Jnani and Bhakta.

Harmony of Jnana and Bhakti (sl 1-4): Arjuna was advised in the last verse of the previous chapter to worship the Personal God, whereas chapter II to X talked of the Impersonal aspect of Godhead. Since the two paths, and their followers are different, Arjuna wanted to know who were better yogis: the Jnani, or the Bhakta.

Sri Krishna replies that the devotees who have supreme faith in Him and whose minds are fixed in Him are the perfect yogis. The Lord then adds that the worshippers of the Imperishable Brahman (the Jnanis) who have completely controlled their senses, and are even-minded under all conditions, attain the Lord Himself, since He has told earlier "The aspirant endowed with Jnana is My very Self" (VII.18).

It is thus that the two paths of spiritual sadhana are harmonised, and also the two classes of aspirants are placed at the same level.

Why Bhakti is superior to Jnana (sl 5): Although the paths of Bhakti and Jnana lead to the same end, the path of Bhakti is better because it is easier. Those who are followers of the path of Imperishable Brahman, find the path difficult and tortuous if they have even the slightest identification with their body or senses. To a Jnani, the body and the world is a bother; but to a devotee his body is an instrument of God to perform His duties in the world. This is why a Jnani practises discrimination (Neti Neti), whereas a Bhakta accepts everything of this world.

The Path of Perfection through Bhakti (sl 6-8): Those who offer all their actions to the Lord, whose mind are absorbed constantly in Him, and regard Him as the Supreme Goal -- for them the Lord Himself becomes the Saviour from the ocean of life and death, i.e., the committed devotees get liberated by His grace. So, the Lord advises Arjuna to fix his mind on Him, and put his thoughts on Him. In this way Arjuna would undoubtedly be able to live in Him alone, i.e., Arjuna will get mukti, which is the ultimate goal set by the Hindu scriptures.

In Hinduism, four kinds of liberation have been described. In sāyujya mukti, the individual soul becomes one with the Godhead. This liberation is sought only by the jnanis, and not by the bhaktas who want one of the other three liberation: sālōkya (living eternally with the Lord in His abode), sāmīpya (staying in nearness of the Lord), sārūpya (getting the same form as the Lord).

Different methods of attaining Bhakti (sl 9-11): Fixing the unwavering mind on God is the best way to attain bhakti, but if a person does not succeed in that, then one may try abhyāsa yoga, the yoga of constant practise of fixing the mind on God. If one cannot practise abhyāsa yoga, then one may devote oneself to the service of the Lord; and if one is unable to do that also, then one must learn to surrender the fruits of all action to Him, and take refuge in Him. This way one gets rid of one's selfishness.

Karma-Phala-tyāga, offering the fruits of action to the Lord (sl 12): The Lord goes on to extol the spiritual path of karma phala tyāga by telling that it is better than meditation based on knowledge of the spiritual truth, which in turn is better than knowledge without meditation, which again is better than mere practice.

This is a tricky shloka, and does not fit in the general pattern of Gita. However Acharya Shankara explains: the perfect sannyasi gives up all action, and thus attains peace. Similarly, when an ignorant person gives up his desire for the

result of action, he too attains peace, since he is out of hankering. In both these cases, 'giving up' is common, and hence the Lord extols it as superior to every other mode of sadhana.

Virtues of the Jnani (sl 13-19): The next seven verses describe the virtues that are natural with an all renouncing sannyasin. However, every spiritual aspirant should struggle to practise these to become perfect.

He who never hates even those who cause him pain, who is friendly and compassionate towards all, who is free from the feelings of "I" and "mine", is even minded in pleasure and pain, is ever content, is self controlled, has firm conviction regarding the essential nature of the Self, and who has devoted his mind and intellect to the Lord is dear to Him.

Being detached from his self-centredness, a devotee is free from joy and anger, and hence never causes any trouble for anyone, nor gets troubled by anyone in the world; he who is not dependent upon anything (even his own body), is internally and externally pure, prompt in action, impartial to all, untroubled by anything in the world, and does not get down to doing anything out of his ego or selfishness (a devotee lets the divine will flow through his body and mind unhindered by his ego). Such a person is dear to the Lord.

He who does not rejoice (on attaining the favourable), nor hates (on attaining the unpleasant), grieves not (on losing something), and desires not (the unattained); and has renounced both good and the evil, is dear to the Lord. It may be noted that unlike the Semitic religions, Hinduism does not talk of giving up the evil, but stresses on giving up both the good and the evil, for, both of them create bondage for the soul.

He who treats friends and foes alike, stays unmoved in honour and calumny, treats the dualities like pleasure and pain, heat and cold alike; who is free from attachment, unchanged by praise and blame, stays silent, ever content, is homeless (a sannyasi), firm of mind, and full of devotion -- such a person is dear to the Lord.

The extremely dear ones of the Lord (sl 20): After enumerating so many virtues in the seven verses, the Lord says that to Him the exceedingly dear are those devotees who regard Him as the Supreme Goal, are endowed with faith and devotion to Him, and who follow the Immortal Dharma as described in the previous seven verses. Practise of this Dharma makes one immortal and hence everyone who wants liberation, and also those who seek Supreme Blessedness should practise these virtues.

Chapter XIII

Kshetra-Kshetrajna Yoga: The way of Discrimination between matter and spirit

Matter and Spirit (sl 1-4): In the seventh chapter the Lord talked of aparā prakriti (lower nature, or, matter) and parā prakriti (the higher nature, or, spirit). Arjuna now wants to know about them, and also about the nature of knowledge (this question by Arjuna is omitted in some versions, so shloka numbers may vary by 1). In this chapter, aparā prakriti has been termed as kshetra (lit. Field), and parā prakriti has been termed kshetrajna (lit. knower of the Field).

The Lord explains that the individual body is the field (since it is through the body that one reaps the fruits of one's karma); and jiva (the individualised soul) is the knower of the field. He then goes on to say that the Lord Himself is the knower in all Fields (which means that jiva is one with God), and the knowledge of the Field and its Knower alone is the true Knowledge, which everyone should try to attain. He also mentions that the Vedas (Shruti), the past Sages (anubhuti, realisation), and the books of reasoning (yukti) have talked of these things in the like manner.

Here it may be mentioned that according to the Hindus, no spiritual truth may contradict the three tests of shruti (Vedas), yukti (ratioanlity), and, anubhuti (personal experience). Even when the Lord Himself is the speaker of spiritual truths, he stresses that He is not contradicting the past masters.

Matter, the Field (5-6): The Field consists of mahabhuta (ether, air, fire, water, earth), ahamkāra (I-consciousness), buddhi (intellect), avyakta (Prakriti, the unmanifested -- cause of all matter), the ten senses, the mind, and the five sense objects (sight, taste, smell, hearing, touch). These have been described in the seventh chapter. In addition to these, the Field also consists of: Desire, hatred, pleasure, pain, aggregate (the body and the senses), intelligence, and fortitude. Not only these, but every modifications of the mind which becomes the object of knowledge, belongs to the realm of the Field.

The essential virtues required to attain Knowledge (7-11): Having told in brief what is Field, and what is Field-knower, the Lord goes on to describe the true Knowledge; but before that He describes the virtues that one must acquire before he becomes fit to attain Knowledge. These virtues are: humility, modesty, non-violence, forgiveness, honesty, service to the teacher, purity, steadfastness, self-control; and dispassion towards sense objects, absence of ego, constant reflection on pain and suffering inherent in birth, old age, disease, and death; detachment, non-identification with son, wife, home and the rest (since their happiness or misery make one happy or miserable); perfect evenness of mind in the midst of the desirable and the undesirable;

unswerving devotion to the Lord through single-minded contemplation, resorting to solitude, distaste for company (of the worldly minded); steadfastness in acquiring the knowledge of Self, and seeing the omnipresent Supreme Being everywhere. These virtues are also called knowledge because they are the means to the attainment of Knowledge. And, that which is contrary to this is ignorance.

Knowledge of Supreme Brahman (12-18): Describing true knowledge, the Lord says that the only thing that ought to be known is that which leads to Immortality. What is that? It is the Supreme Brahman, which is without beginning, and is said to be neither being, nor non-being. This verse explains that unlike any object of the world, Brahman cannot be proved to exist (sat) through experience or words, hence it cannot be called sat (being). Similarly, the consciousness associated with the the idea of the non existence of an object is called asat (non-being) (eg. flowers in the sky); but Brahman is not asat, since It can be known through shāstra pramāna (evidence of the scriptures), which again is based on the aparoksha anubhuti (direct and intuitive experience) of the sages.

To prevent the misunderstanding that Brahman is non-being (as is believed by Buddhists and others), the Lord uses the language of the parables and narrates Its upādhis (adjuncts) figuratively that can be understood by a common man. It must be made clear that the description that follows, is only apparent, and not at all real. The Lord says that It (Brahman) has Its hands, feet, eyes, head, mouth, and ears everywhere, and It pervades all beings as existence and consciousness (since sense organs require consciousness to function). It shines through the functions of all the senses, and yet It has no physical sense organ; It is unattached, and yet is the sustainer of all; It is devoid of the gunas (three qualities of Nature), and yet enjoys them. He is both outside (as the external body) and inside (as inmost Self) of all beings; It appears as moving and also as unmoving bodies. He is incomprehensible because of His subtlety; and He is very near (residing in one's heart and realised so by the enlightened), and yet far away (To the ignorant who think It to be far away in the space, and unknowable even in billions of years).

Like the indivisible akāsa (ether) that appears divided by the material objects, the Brahman is undivided, and yet appears to exist as if divided in beings. That knowable Brahman (as mentioned in verse 12) appears as the creator, sustainer, and destroyer of all beings. The Supreme Being is the Light of all lights, is said to be beyond darkness (of ignorance). As knowledge, the object of knowledge, and the goal of knowledge, It is planted pre-eminently in the hearts of every living being. Brahman is within everyone, and not merely in the heaven.

The Lord concludes the topic by telling that the devotees who thus understand the Field, the knowledge and the object of knowledge as described above, become worthy of His state (liberation).

Prakriti and Purusha (19-22): Coming back to the issues of aparā prakriti (Prakriti) and parā prakriti (Purusha) that was raised in the seventh chapter, the Lord says that both Prakriti and Purusha are beginningless (these are the two natures of God, and God Himself is beginningless). Also, all forms (mind, body, senses, matter) and gunas (sattva, rajas, tamas, which manifest in the form of pleasure, pain, delusion etc.) are born of Prakriti. The same Prakriti is also said to be the cause of generation of physical body and the sense organs, whereas the Purusha is said to be the cause of experiencing pleasure and pain. Here Purusha means the intelligent principle synonymous with jiva (the individualised soul), Kshetrajna, and bhokta (enjoyer), but does not mean the Paramatman, the Supreme Self.

Purusha and Prakriti of Gita should not be confused with the male and female principle of common understanding, and also of some other philosophy. Here Purusha means pure consciousness, and Prakriti means non-conscious matter.

Embodied in Prakriti, Purusha experiences the gunas (manifested as various qualities like happiness, misery, wisdom, foolishness etc.) and feels identified with them, which results in His being born in good and evil wombs. Thus, Purusha and Prakriti are the actual cause of the phenomenal existence, the samsāra. Prakriti creates the samsāra by transforming itself into body, senses, feelings etc., whereas Purusha behaves like a samsārin, the phenomenal being, by identifying Itself with the body and also experiencing the pleasure, pain etc., associated with the body. Despite this apparent identification, which is born of sheer ignorance, Purusha always remains unchanging, and yet appears like a transmigratory being.

The Supreme Spirit in the body is the Witness (He does not actually take part in the actions of the body as the senses do), the Approver (of actions by the body, senses etc.), the Supporter (the intelligence of the Supreme Self reflected by the body, senses etc. serves the purpose of the jiva), the Enjoyer (since Supreme Spirit alone has the eternal Intelligence), is the sovereign Lord (since It is one with the universe), and the Highest Self (since It is superior to the body, senses, mind etc.).

Self Knowledge (23-26): He who knows Purusha, Prakriti, and the gunas is never born again regardless of his way of life. Some people realise the Self within themselves through the mind purified by meditation, some by devotion to knowledge, and some by devotion to work. Many others hear about the Self from others and start worshipping It with full faith. These people too attain liberation.

Whatever is born, animate or inanimate, is born through union of the Field and the Knower of the Field. But this union is not like the union of two similar material objects, since matter and spirit are opposed to each other in every sense. When they come near each other, they superimpose the qualities of each other on themselves, as a rope in darkness acquires the qualities of a snake. When a person realises the identity of the individual soul and the Lord of the universe, then the identification drops automatically, and the jiva gets liberated. Hence it is the knowledge of one's true spiritual nature, as one with the Lord, that is really important in life.

Beyond Illusions (27- 30): He who sees the Supreme Lord dwelling alike within all beings, and not perishing when the beings perish, he alone is wise. When one sees the Lord present alike everywhere, he does not injure Self (the spirit) by self (the false self born of identification with the body, senses etc.), and thus reaches the supreme state. It is the identification of a person with the non-self that is the cause of all bondage and rebirth. Once this identification is cut asunder, liberation comes spontaneously. When one sees that all actions are done by Prakriti and that the Self is beyond any action then alone he is called wise.

When one sees that the manifoldness and diversity is centred in the One, and that all evolution is from that One, he becomes one with Brahman.

The Supreme Self and the manifoldness (31-33): Being beginningless and without any gunas, the Supreme Self neither acts, nor gets stained by the action of the body in which It dwells. Just as the all-pervading space is not stained by the objects it pervades, similarly, the Spirit abiding in all bodies does not get stained by the acts of the body. Giving another example the Lord says that just as the sun illumines the entire world; similarly, the Spirit illumines the whole body without getting tainted.

Those who fully understand the distinction between the Field, the Knower of the Field, and the means of deliverance from Prakriti (the means are meditation, renunciation, and other spiritual disciplines), they alone attain the Supreme.

Chapter XIV

Guana traya Vibhaga: The yoga of Discrimination of the three gunas

Introduction (sl 1-2): It was stated earlier that the Lord creates, sustains and destroys the universe through His two aspects -- matter and Spirit. Although the soul residing in the body is one with God, it wrongly identifies itself with the three gunas (lit. quality) of Prakriti due to ignorance, and then gets born in various bodies, suffering the good and the bad produced by the actions of the body.

This chapter discusses the three gunas. The wise ones who understand the characteristics of the three gunas, are never born again: it is thus that they get mukti, liberation.

Creation explained (sl 3-4): Matter and Spirit are the Lord's two aspects. When the time of creation comes, the Lord in His Spirit form impregnates the Great Nature (which is also His own form) from which Hiranyagarbha (the Cosmic egg) is born. The full creation proceeds from this Hiranyagarbha. In this way, the Lord is both the Father and Mother of the universe.

Not only that. Whatever is born anywhere in the universe, including in the heaven, the Lord Himself is its seed giving father, and the Great Nature, the womb. Thus, the Lord is directly the father of microbes, plants, animals, men, gods and other beings. No birth is possible without Him.

The three gunas (sl 5-9): The insentient Prakriti, the mother of all matter and material things, consists of the three gunas: sattva, rajas, and tamas. Naturally everything born of Prakriti (i.e., excepting the Spirit) in this universe is compounded of these three elements. The soul, on the other hand, is of the nature of pure consciousness, and when it comes in contact with Prakriti (which is fully non-conscious entity), It (the soul) comes under bondage through the three gunas of Prakriti. Although this bondage is not real, the soul, out of its sheer delusion caused by Prakriti, imagines itself to be under real bondage, and goes on to enjoy and suffer for things which are not at all his. This is maya.

Sattva is by nature serene, luminous, healthful and stainless. It creates the attachment to happiness, knowledge and such noble qualities in the soul. It must be remembered that even noble qualities like knowledge, are attributes of mind, and hence belong to the realm of Prakriti. A person who wants mukti, must come out of the snares of noble qualities also, and be free of every duality. This is the fundamental difference between Vedanta and other religions that preach to be good. Virtues like goodness and nobility must be cultivated, since these are the stepping stones to the Highest, but they are not themselves the Highest. Sri Ramakrishna's story of the three robbers beautifully highlights this fact. In the story even sattva is a robber just like his two brothers rajas and tamas. Sattva is a noble robber, but indeed a robber. Even he cannot dare go anywhere near freedom.

Rajas is of the nature of passion, and is the cause of desire and attachment. It binds the soul by creating an attachment in it towards action. People who are very active are rajasik in nature, and hence quite far from realisation.

Tamas has its roots in deep ignorance, so it binds the soul to delusion. Due to tamas, creatures get attached to sleep, sloth, and confusion. Under its influence one becomes lazy, inattentive, and unproductive. In matters of inactivity, both sattva and tamas are alike, so quite often tamas passes off as sattva.

An overview of the gunas (sl 10-18): The three gunas are always together, but each one tries to assert itself over the other two. When sattva becomes powerful in a being, he becomes full of knowledge and noble qualities, when rajas overpowers the other two, the soul becomes greedy, hyper active, enterprising, lustful etc; and when tamas prevails over sattva and rajas, the result is a clouded mind, indolence, delusion etc.

Life after death is also determined by the preponderance of a particular guna at the time of death. Sattva leads one to higher heavens, rajas takes the departed soul to the wombs of active species, and tamas takes one to the wombs of creatures who are devoid of reason.

Repeating what has been told earlier, the Lord says that actions that are based on sattva, produce good and clean results; the results of actions based on rajas are painful in nature; and tamas produces results that are deluding in nature. Sattva gives birth to knowledge, rajas produces greed, and tamas gives rise to confusion, ignorance, and sloth. Those who are established in sattva go upward to heaven; those established in rajas are born among men, and those steeped in tamas go downward to the level of beasts.

Mukti (sl 19-20): Enjoying and suffering through myriads of experiences, the Spirit stays entangled in the snares of maya through the gunas. When the right knowledge dawns upon the Spirit, It struggles to come out of the sway of the gunas to attain liberation. When a man of insight realises that it is the gunas that transform themselves into bodies, senses and sense objects; and that the agent of action, the instrument of action, and the result of action -- all belong to Prakriti, and he also comes to know the Lord who is beyond the gunas, he attains the Lord, which is liberation. When the embodied soul (jiva) transcends the three gunas, it is then that it comes out of the cycle of birth, death, old age, pain etc. and becomes immortal.

Beyond gunas (sl 21-25): How to recognise the person who has transcended the three gunas, is the question of Arjuna. To this the Lord enumerates the qualities of a trigunatita (transcended person):

He neither hates the presence of the noble (sattva), activity (rajas), or delusion (tamas); nor does he desire them when they are absent; he remains like a witness amidst all the happenings around him without being affected, and stays firm and unwavering, knowing that all the activities are of the

gunas, and not of himself, or of anything else. He always keeps his mind fixed on the Self and is indifferent to pain and pleasure; to him a clod, a stone, and gold are alike; to him the dear and the unfriendly are alike; he is of firm mind, and is calm in praise or blame. He is indifferent to honour and disgrace, is impartial to friend and foe, and gives up all undertakings (since all action belong to the gunas).

These in brief are the qualities of the person who has transcended the gunas. However, these qualities do not surface in a person after realisation, but these need to be acquired as virtues by special effort prior to the attainment of Self knowledge. After realisation, these qualities become natural to a jivanmukta person.

How to transcend the gunas (sl 26-28): The Lord is the Abode of the Immortal and the unchangeable Brahman, is the Abode of Eternal Dharma, and is also the Abode of Absolute Bliss. So, those who worship the Lord with the yoga of unswerving love, rise above the gunas and become fit to be one with Brahman.

Chapter XV

Purushottama Yoga: The way to the Supreme Self

God and Mammon cannot be served at the same time; nor can two swords be kept in the same scabbard -- these words of Jesus Christ are true for every seeker of spirituality. He who wants to attain liberation, or wants to love God with unswerving devotion, has to be detached from the world, the samsāra. This chapter describes the world through the analogy of an asvattha tree, so that an aspirant understands its nature and then develops an intense dispassion towards it. This leads a devotee towards love and knowledge of God.

Samsāra as the asvattha tree (sl 1-4): This samsāra, or the cosmic existence is like a huge asvattha tree (the holy fig tree, Ficus Religiosa), which is rooted above in Saguna Brahman (Brahman with maya), and whose branches are the evolutes of Prakriti (mahat etc. see ch. VII). The leaves of this tree are the Vedas, since these protect the samsara tree by spelling out dharma and adharma. Its branches spread above (up to Brahma loka, the highest heavens) and below (to the subhuman planes), is nourished by the gunas (see ch. XIV), the sense objects are the buds, and its clustering roots spread downwards in the world of men, giving rise to action. These roots are the samsakāra (latent impressions) that are the cause and also the effects of good and bad actions.

It is difficult for a non spiritual person to comprehend the samsara's true form, including its origin, end, and its existence; because it continues to go on for him, and also keeps on changing its form. The only way out is to cut down this firm rooted samsara tree with the strong axe of detachment, and then to pray, 'I take refuge in God, from whom has come forth all this'. An aspirant should then strive to reach that state from where one does not have to come back to this samsara.

The Goal and the way (sl 5-6): The characteristics of a perfect spiritual aspirant have been described by the Lord as: he is free from pride and delusion, has risen above worldly attachments, is liberated from the pairs of the opposites like pleasure and pain, his desires are fully stilled, and he is ever devoted to the Supreme Self. When a person acquires these qualities, he reaches the Supreme Goal -- the Supreme Abode of the Lord. That Abode of the Lord is self illumined, and is beyond the illumination of the sun, moon, or fire. One who reaches that Abode, he does not have to be born again.

Creation and Rebirth (sl 7-11): Creation in Vedanta is explained with the analogy of the sun in the sky, and its reflection in a bowl of water. The actual sun and the reflected sun are apparently two, but when the water dries up in the bowl, the reflected sun goes back to the actual sun only. In this analogy, the sun is the Supreme Lord, the bowl is the Prakriti, and the water in the bowl is the mind. When the water (i.e. mind) is emptied, the bowl (Prakriti) continues to be there, and can be filled up by some other water (rebirth). But when the bowl itself is destroyed (i.e. Prakriti itself is dissolved through right knowledge), that reflected sun can never again come into existence.

In these verses, this concept of creation and rebirth are explained. At the time of creation, an eternal portion of the Lord (a portion of the Infinite is also infinite) becomes a living soul (jiva) in the world, and draws to itself the five senses and the mind from the Prakriti. At the time of death, and later at the time of acquiring a new body (i.e. rebirth), the lord of the body and senses (i.e., jiva) is accompanied by the subtle body (which includes senses and the mind. Also see notes in ch. VII). This carrying by the jiva, of the senses etc. is like the wind carrying away the scents from where it passes. Thus, even when the physical body is destroyed after death, jiva continues its journey with the essential components of the previous body and the mind, to work out its karma through a new body.

The physical organs like the eyes, are only the external agents of the senses, which are actually subtle, and belong to the subtle body. Jiva lords over the senses and the mind to experience the sense objects of the world. The jiva, however, cannot be perceived by a common man when it leaves the body at the time of death, or when it dwells in the body, or when it is united with the gunas, or while it experiences the objects. Only the eyes of wisdom, acquired

by the study of scriptures and contemplation on them, can perceive the jiva in all its modes. When the aspirants who are armed with yoga of concentration and self control, make effort to see the jiva, they behold him dwelling within themselves; but the undisciplined minds (who lack austerity and self control) do not succeed in perceiving him, even if they make efforts to do so.

The glories of the Lord (sl 12-15): These verses describe Lord's presence in this world:

The light that is in the sun and illumines the whole universe, the light that is in the moon, and also in the fire, is due to the Lord. Entering the earth, the Lord sustain all beings by His energy, and becoming the sapid moon, He nourishes all herbs (or, plants). It has been the belief of the Indians that the moon (lit. Soma) is the repository of all sap. When the sap enters a plant, it gets nourished and enriched. The verse says that Lord Himself is that Soma.

The Lord enters the bodies of all living creatures in the form of the Vaishvānara fire (the fire that lives in the stomach), and mingling with the prāna (upward vital air) and apāna (downward vital air), He alone digests the four kinds of food (masticated, sucked, swallowed, and licked) taken by the living beings.

Above all, He is seated in the hearts of all as the onlooker and witness of all that is good and bad going around; from Him comes memory and knowledge, and also their loss. He alone is the Author of Vedānta, the Knower of the Vedas, and He alone is to be known through all the Vedas.

The true nature of the Lord (sl 16-20): There are two beings in the world: the Perishable and the Imperishable. The Perishable comprises all creatures and changing forms, and the Imperishable is said to be the Unchanging maya shakti, the power of the Lord. This maya shakti is the seed of all all perishable beings of this samsara. From the relative standpoint of the world, this samsara (the banyan tree) is endless, hence its seed, the maya shakti is also Imperishable.

Beyond the perishable and the Imperishable lies Purushottama (God, the Supreme Self), who is the Highest, unchanging, all pervasive, and sustainer of the universe. The Lord is superior to the Perishable (the tree), and also superior to the Imperishable (maya shakti, the seed of the tree), and hence He is extolled in the world and in the Vedas as the Supreme Self.

The truly undeluded person -- who knows the Lord to be the Supreme Self -- he knows all that is to be known (that the individualised soul and the Supreme Self are one), and he worships the Lord with all his heart. A man becomes truly wise only after knowing this profound truth, and after that he is no more bound by any duties or responsibilities.

While concluding, the Lord terms this chapter as shastra, scripture. This term has not been used in Gita for any other chapter. According to Acharya Shankara, this chapter contains the essence of the entire Vedas, hence this honour.

Chapter XVI

Daivasur Sampad Vibhaga Yoga: The Division of Divine and Demoniatic treasures

In the XIVth chapter, the Lord discussed the three qualities: sattva, rajas and tamas of Prakriti that are responsible for the existence of this universe. Every object and every person is composed of these three qualities in varying proportion. With the performance of spiritual sadhana, the personality of an aspirant undergoes major transformation. Instead of being dictated by rajas and tamas, he now gets established in sattva. This results in manifestation of divine qualities (Daivi Sampad) born of shraddha (faith and respect) rooted in sattvaguna. On the other hand, people whose shraddha is rooted in rajas and tamas, get a preponderance of demonic traits (Asuri sampad).

Lord describes the traits of these two types of personalities.

The Divine qualities (sl 1-3): Fearlessness, purity of heart, perseverance in the yoga of Self-knowledge, charity, self-control, sacrifice, study of the scriptures, austerity, honesty; non-violence, truthfulness, absence of anger, renunciation, equanimity, abstaining from slanderous talk, compassion for all creatures, freedom from greed, gentleness, modesty, absence of fickleness, courage, forgiveness, fortitude (the power to sustain one's body and mind even when tired or dejected), cleanliness (external and internal), absence of malice, and absence of pride -- these are some of the qualities of those who are born with divine virtues.

The Demoniatic traits (sl 4): Those born with demonic qualities have traits like: Hypocrisy, arrogance, conceit (self pride), anger, rudeness, and ignorance. More of these will be discussed a little later.

The effects of the natures (sl 5-6): There are only two types of human beings in this world: the divine; and the demoniatic. Divine qualities lead to salvation, whereas the demonic traits create bondage. The Lord added that Arjuna need not worry, since he was born with divine qualities.

More traits of demoniatic persons (sl 7- 18): Persons of demonic nature do not know correctly what to do and what not to do to attain the goal of life. They neither have purity, nor good conduct, nor truthfulness to attain the highest. People with such propensity say: The world is devoid of truth (i.e. truth has absolutely no value in this world, and that the scriptures etc. are all untrue),

without a moral basis (which sustains the world), and without a God. The union of male and female, and lust alone is the cause of this world, and nothing else.

Holding such a view (materialists and atheists), these degraded souls of little understanding and cruel acts are born as enemies of humanity for the destruction of the world. Filled with insatiable desires, hypocrisy, pride, and arrogance; they hold false views due to delusion and impure motives. Obsessed with endless anxiety lasting until death, they consider gratification of desire as their highest aim, and are convinced that sense pleasure is everything. Bound by hundreds of ties of hope and enslaved by lust and anger; they find nothing wrong in amassing wealth by unlawful means for the satisfaction of their passions.

They think on these lines: "This I have gained today, and the remaining, I shall gain soon. I have this much wealth, and I will acquire more in future. I have destroyed most of my enemies, and I shall destroy the remaining too. I am the Lord of all, I enjoy. I am successful, powerful, and happy. I am rich and born in a noble family. Who is equal to me in this world? I shall perform grand sacrifices (to gain fame), shall make donations (to be acclaimed), and I shall rejoice in my achievements."

Bewildered by many such fancies; entangled in the net of delusion; addicted to the enjoyment of lust; these people of demoniac tendencies fall into foul hells after they die. Self-conceited, haughty, filled with pride and intoxication of wealth; these demoniac persons perform sacrifices only in name, and not according to the scriptural injunctions.

The Destiny of the demoniac natured people (sl 18- 20): These people possess egoism, power, arrogance, lust, and anger; and being envious by nature, they hate the Lord who dwells in their own bodies and those of others (by hurting others and themselves). In turn, the Lord hurls these cruel, haters, cruel, sinful, and mean people into the cycles of rebirth in the womb of demons again and again, where these deluded ones sink to the lowest hell without ever attaining the Lord.

One should not try to see too much in the graphic description of people with evil tendencies and their fate that has been stated in verses 7-20. These verses are meant to serve as a warning to people who want to lead a spiritual, or at least a dignified life. Hinduism does not accept the idea of eternal damnation, and hence the verses here mean that people with evil tendencies keep getting born again and again for a very long time.

The gates to hell (sl 21- 22): Lust, anger, and greed are the three gates of hell that lead the soul to ruin (or bondage). Therefore, one must learn to give up these three. One who has escaped these three gates of hell, practises only what is good for him, and thus attains the Supreme Goal.

Activities must be guided by the scriptures (sl 23-24):

He who disregards the injunctions of the scriptures and acts upon one's impulse of desire, attains neither perfection, nor happiness, nor the Supreme Goal. So, the scriptures alone must be your authority in determining the right and the wrong. One should perform one's duties of the world only after learning the injunctions of the scriptures.

These two verses proclaim the superiority of the Vedas over other Hindu scriptures, and also over reasoning/public opinion in matters of morality, ethics and social code. Any social practice that is based on reasoning or opinion, personal or social, is sure to break down in the moments of stress and crisis, throwing a total confusion all around. But the practices born of scriptures (these are actually records of spiritual realisations of the sages), always survive the storm caused by personal and social crisis.

Chapter XVII

Shraddha Traya Vibhaga Yoga: The Three Fold Division of Faith

At the end of the previous chapter, Sri Krishna expressed that actions by a person must be performed in accordance with the injunctions of the scriptures. But, what about those persons who perform their duties with shraddha (faith and respect), but know nothing about the scriptures. Are they also doomed like those who know the scriptural injunctions but do not follow them?

A word on shraddha: Hindu scriptures lay a lot of stress on cultivating shraddha, and preach that the personality, orientation, and attitude of a person is governed by the shraddha that he has. The word "shraddha" cannot be translated perfectly in English, although it is a normal practice to use the word 'faith' for it. Shraddha actually means the disposition of a person born of an affirmative faith, conviction and reverential attitude towards Spiritual Reality. A man is made of his shraddha, he is that shraddha, and that shraddha is he. A person with sattvic shraddha moves towards knowledge and happiness; with rajasik shraddha one pursues the path of action that leads him to pain and suffering; and tamasik shraddha takes its adherents to ignorance and delusion.

A word on scriptural injunctions: Scriptures of any race contain the collective wisdom in the fields of spirituality and culture of that race. This wisdom, coloured by aspirations, values and experiences that accumulate in the racial memory, get transcribed in scriptures through its prophets. So, no member is allowed to transgress the parameters set by the followers of a scripture. Opposed to the rules laid down by the scriptures, there is the natural impulse of personal desire present in everyone that tends to rule his mentality and reaction to a particular situation. This natural impulse is not permitted to rule supreme in any religion.

Three types of shradha: Sattvic, Rajasik, Tamasik (sl 1- 6): Arjuna wanted to know: What is the nature of devotion of those who perform spiritual disciplines with shraddha but without following the scriptural injunctions (out of ignorance, and not out of negligence). Is it of the nature of sattva (goodness), rajas (passion), or tamas (ignorance)?

The Lord then categorised the various acts, according to sattva, rajas and tamas (also please see chapter XIV for explanation of these terms). The shraddha of each person is in accordance with one's own natural disposition. A person is made of his faith; what his faith is, he indeed is that.

Sattvic people worship celestial gods (Indra etc.), rajasik people worship demigods, and tamasik people worship ghosts and spirits. When worshipped with shraddha, these deities answer the prayers of their devotees, but they cannot lead a person to higher planes of existence. However, these deities are manifestations of the Lord Himself.

Most people are impelled by the force of their lust and attachment, and hence worship in a rajasik or tamasik way. In the process, they perform severe austerities, and thus torture the body, organs, and the indwelling Lord (by transgressing His injunctions recorded in the scriptures). These people have fiendish disposition.

Three types of Food: Sattvic, Rajasik, tamasik (sl 7- 10)

Sattvic food promotes longevity, vitality, strength, health, happiness, and joy. Food of this type are juicy, smooth, substantial, and agreeable. Rajasik food are excessively bitter, sour, salty, hot, pungent, dry, and burning; and cause pain, grief, and disease. Tamasik food are ill cooked, stale, tasteless, putrid, rotten, impure, and left over. The term leftover (uchhista) means the food that has already been partaken by someone. Hindus lay a lot of emphasis on not partaking of anything that has already been tasted/partaken by someone else. Dining or drinking from the same palate/container is a strict no, no.

Three types of sacrifices (yajnas) (sl 11- 13): Yajna was an integral part of a householder's life in ancient India. This included offering to gods through worship, ritual or sacrifices; serving people through hospitality and gifts, and offering sacrifices to the indwelling self in the form of austerities. These three are now being classified.

Sattvic yajna is performed according to the rules of the scriptures, without any desire for a reward, and with a firm belief that it is a sacred duty for him. Rajasik yajna has a great element of show and grandeur, and is performed with an expectation of reward in return. And, the sacrifice which is not performed according to the scriptural rules, and in which no hymns are chanted, no fees is paid to the priests, and which is devoid of faith, is said to be tamasik yajna.

Three types of tapas (austerities): (sl 14- 19): Now is described the ways of purifying body, mind and speech. The austerities performed with this purpose are called tapas.

The worship of gods, Brahmins, teachers, and of the wise; external and internal purity, honesty, celibacy, and non violence -- these are said to be the austerity of the body. Speech that is non-offensive, truthful, pleasant, beneficial, and a regular study of scriptures is called the austerity of speech. Serenity of mind, gentleness, silence, self-control, and purity of thought are called the austerity of the mind.

The above mentioned threefold tapas are also of three kinds according to the gunas. Sattvic tapas is performed by the steady persons without a desire for the fruit; Rajasik tapas is performed for mere show with an eye on gaining respect, honour, and reverence. Results of such austerity are inevitable uncertain and transitory. Tamasik austerity is performed with foolish stubbornness, or with self-torture, or with an intention of harming others.

Three types of gift/charity (sl 20- 22): The gift that is made to a worthy person without any expectation, but with the conviction that that it is his duty to give, and is made at the right place and time (i.e. in a holy place and on auspicious occasions), is considered to be a sattvic gift. Gift that is made unwillingly, or to get something in return, or with a hope of returned favour is called rajasik gift. And, gift that is made to an unworthy person, at a wrong place and time, or without paying proper respect to the receiver, is said to be a tamasik gift.

Purifying imperfect actions (sl 23-28): According to the Hindus, yajna is the key to existence. Yajnas are performed by the Brahmins for the stability of the world order (see chapter IV also). The Lord says that Brahma/ Prajapati creates the Brahmins, the Vedas, and the sacrifices (the three essentials of yajna) by means of "Aum Tat Sat", which is also the threefold designation of Brahman, the Supreme Reality.

Therefore, the acts of sacrifice, gift, and austerity prescribed by the scriptures are always begun by the followers of the Vedas by uttering "Aum". The seekers of mukti perform various acts of sacrifice, gift, and austerity by uttering "Tat" (meaning 'That': the Indefinable, which can only be indirectly described as "That") and without any expectation of recompense. The word "Sat" (Reality, the supreme and unchanging Existence) is used in the sense of Reality and goodness. The word "Sat" is also used for an auspicious action (like marriage). Steadfastness in sacrifice, gift, and austerity is also called "Sat". And, anything else connected with sacrifice, austerity, gift or with Brahman is also called "Sat".

But, whatever sacrifice or gift is made, whatever austerity is performed, whatever ceremony is observed -- is called "Asat" (non existence), if it is done without shraddha. Such acts have no value here or hereafter.

To conclude: Even if a person is ignorant of scriptural injunctions, he should lead his life with proper shraddha and should make efforts to cultivate habits that are entrenched in sattva. Whenever a person feels that his gift, worship or austerity may be defective, he should purify it by uttering 'Aum Tat Sat'. In this way he would cultivate noble qualities, and will ultimately attain the highest.

Chapter XVIII

Moksha Sannyasa Yoga: The way to Liberation through renunciation

This last chapter sums up the whole of Gita and also presents the gist of the Vedic religion, philosophy and its way of life.

Action and renunciation (sl 1-6): Arjuna wanted to know the difference between sannyasa (giving up all actions) and tyaga (giving up the results of action). Actually, these two terms convey the same idea of renunciation, and have been used thus in Gita. However, as will be shown later, there is fine difference between these two. Reference may also be made to chapter V to understand them.

In reply to Arjuna's question, the Lord said that sannyasa is the renunciation of works which are performed due to desire, while the offering of the fruits of all action to the Lord is called tyaga. He further added that there are philosophers who declare that all works should be given up; whereas others say that works of sacrifice, gift and austerity should not be given up. The Lord himself supports the second view and says that noble acts like sacrifice etc. must not be given up, since they purify the mind; and this performance of action should be without any attachment or desire for fruit of action.

Keeping in harmony with the overall philosophy of Gita, Acharya Shankara explains that these verses are not applicable to sages who are endowed with the Supreme Knowledge of Brahman. Action is possible only when a person is conscious of multiplicity in the form of agent (i.e., performer), instrument of action, object on which action is performed, and result of action. This means that only a person who has not yet become perfect, is fit to perform action. Not only that, it is imperative that such persons perform detached action (of course, only prescribed duties), and through it strive to attain purity of heart, which would ultimately make him fit for the Knowledge of Reality. Also, those who feel tempted to give up work due to delusion or laziness, must work to overcome their tamasik tendencies.

The view of Acharya Shankara has special significance. It implies that when a person attains the state when he sees only unity all around, he has no more duties to perform, and he need not work anymore. But those who have not yet reached that state, they must continue to work without attachment.

On renunciation (sl 7-12): There are four kinds of action: nitya (obligatory duties), naimittika (rites that are performed on special occasions), kamya (acts performed with a particular desire in mind), and nisiddha (prohibited action). The first two types are purificatory in nature, whereas the last two are condemnable acts for spiritual aspirants. The discussion in these verses is only on the first two types of actions.

Renunciation of duties due to delusion is called tamasik; renunciation due to fear of physical suffering or pain is called rajasik; but performance of these actions as a matter of duty, and also with no desire to any fruit, is called sattvic renunciation. So, the wise men endowed with sattva do not give up disagreeable duty, nor does he feel attachment to a duty that is likeable.

It is impossible for a common man to give up action entirely. But he who has no desire for the results of the actions performed, is as good as one who has renounced everything, and is a Knower of Brahman.

The threefold results of action -- desirable, undesirable and mixed come after death only to he who is not yet a Knower of Brahman, i.e. has not yet renounced fully. On the other hand, a perfect sannyasin, who has renounced all, is neither reborn, nor does he get affected by the three kinds of fruit that result in births in heaven, earth, or in lower species.

Action (sl 13-18): Whatever action a man performs with his body, speech, or mind, whether right or wrong -- requires five causes for its accomplishment: the body, the doer, the senses, the pranas (vital breaths), and the presiding deity of the senses (It is the firm belief of the Hindus that every sense performs its respective action only because there is a presiding deity that

controls it). This is how Vedanta, the philosophy of knowledge -- by studying which one becomes free of action-- preach the philosophy of action.

The philosophy of action being so, anyone who thinks that the Self is the agent of action, is deluded. Hence, he who is free from the feeling of I-consciousness, and whose understanding of philosophy is clear, even if he slays these men (this was being preached just before the war), he kills not, nor is he bound by the results of this kind of action (sl 17).

The verse 17, marks the conclusion of the topic that had begun with "The self slays not, nor it gets slain" (II. 19). The essence of the teachings is: A sannyasi is free from "I. me. mine", so the results of action cannot touch him; even if it be killing or his own death.

The Lord further adds that knowledge, the object of knowledge, and the knower are the threefold incitement to action; and the instrument, the object, and the doer are the threefold basis of action. Thus action is not possible unless there is an incitement, and also a real act.

Threefold character of knowledge, action, doer (sl 19-28): In XVIIth chapter, the Lord classified austerity etc. in three types. He now continues with the classification of some more things, beginning with knowledge, action and doer. These also belong to Prakriti, and hence have sattva, rajas and tamas in them.

The knowledge that makes a person see One indestructible substance in all beings -- undivided in the divided things-- is said to be of sattvic nature. When one sees different realities of various types in all beings as separate from one another (i.e., one sees different souls in different bodies with different characteristics, such as happiness, misery etc.), then that knowledge is called rajasik. And, the knowledge that results in seeing the whole in one single limited things, then it is of tamasik type. Thus, a man with tamasik knowledge sees his body as the Self, and thinks that the Lord is confined to a single image or symbol. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that an inferior devotee thinks that God resides in the heaven, a mediocre devotee thinks that God resides in his heart, and a superior devotee sees God as all pervasive.

An action is characterised by sattva only if it is an obligatory duty, performed without love or hate, and with no desire for its fruit. Action performed with great effort, and with an eye on gratification of desire, or performed out of pride and conceit is of rajasik nature. And, action performed through ignorance, without regard to its consequence, loss, injury, or even one's own capability, is of tamasik nature.

A sattvic doer (anyone who does anything is a doer) is free from attachment and egoism, is endowed with fortitude and zeal, and is unaffected by success and failure. A rajasik doer is passionately attached to action and its result, is greedy, violent, impure, and is moved greatly by joy or sorrow. A tamasik doer is unsteady, vulgar, arrogant, deceitful, malicious, indolent, despairing and delaying by nature.

Some more classifications (sl 29-40): Sattvic buddhi (buddhi means intellect/understanding that determines the course of action in us) determines the path of work and renunciation, and right and wrong action. It also determines for a man the cause of fear, fearlessness, bondage, and liberation, and thus leads the person to the right course of action. Rajasik buddhi gives a distorted understanding of dharma and adharma, and also of what one should do and what one must not do. Tamasik buddhi makes a person comprehend adharma as dharma and reverses all values.

Dhriti means firmness, the power to hold on to one's strength when he is faced with adversity. This particular trait of mind is extremely important for everyone in life to succeed, and is particularly important for spiritual aspirants. Dhriti also is of three kinds. Sattvic dhriti is accompanied by unswerving concentration on the ideal of Brahman, and is responsible for the control of the activities of the mind, the pranas (vital forces of the body), and the senses. Rajasik dhriti makes one hold on to dhrama (way of life), pleasure, and wealth with intense attachment and also with a strong desire for the fruits of these. Tamasik dhriti makes a stupid person hold on to his sleep, fear, grief, despondency and sensuality.

Happiness of sattvic nature is born of the clear knowledge of the Self. In this kind of happiness one rejoices by what one has achieved through long practice (i.e. it is not instant sense gratification), and also reaches the end of pain. This happiness is attained through means that initially look like poison, but like nectar in the end (for example, study looks like poison to a kid, but it gives him lasting joy in the long run). Rajasik happiness is born of contact of the senses with their respective objects, and is like nectar in the beginning, but like poison in the end. Tamasik happiness deludes the soul at the beginning, and also after its termination. It originates from sleep, sloth and error.

Thus, there is no creature here on earth, nor in heaven or anywhere else, who is free from the three gunas born of Prakriti. The goal is to transcend Prakriti, or at least be established in sattva.

The four Castes and their duties (41- 44): Giving up the world to attain Self Knowledge may be the best path, but for the majority it is not possible to do so. They have to depend on work to attain liberation. For this reason, Hinduism evolved a system of duties and responsibilities, known as caste system, based on nature of individuals. The philosophy was that if a person followed the duties of his caste properly, without giving it up out of greed or fear, then that person was sure to attain the Highest. In addition, Hinduism also stressed that a spiritual aspirant should perform his duty in a detached way and he should offer the fruit of its action to the Lord. This is the meaning and concept of svadharma -- sacred duty of a person.

The duties of brahmins, kshatriyas, vaishyas and shudras have been assigned according to their respective gunas (sattva, rajas, tamas. see also chapter XIV). A brahmin has more of sattva, a kshatriya has excess of rajas over sattva, a vaishya has excess of rajas over tamas, and a shudra has excess of tamas over rajas. Depending on the inherent tendencies of a person, he gets born in different castes, and hence he must follow the duties of his caste if he wishes to attain enlightenment.

The duties of a brahmin are: Serenity, self control, austerity, purity, patience, honesty, knowledge, realisation and faith in the scriptural words. The duties of a kshatriya are: Heroism, vigour, firmness, dexterity, not fleeing from battle, generosity, and administrative skills. The duties of a vaishya are: Agriculture, cattle rearing, and trade. The duties of a shudra are: Action consisting of service.

Attaining perfection through performance of duty (sl 45-48): All beings are born from the Lord, and He pervades the whole universe. By worshipping that Lord through performance of duty, one attains perfection. One's own dharma, even if imperfect, is better than the well performed dharma of another. He who performs his prescribed duty, does not incur any sin. The Lord thus explains to Arjuna that by killing his opponents he won't be incurring any sin.

An unenlightened person cannot remain inactive, and again, work prompted by one's own nature can never be injurious to him. So, a person must not give up the work to which he is born, even if it may seem imperfect; for, all undertakings are bound to have some kind of imperfection associated with it, as fire is always accompanied by smoke.

Actually, no social system can ever be perfect. A look at history shows the failure of every social experiment after a period of glorious existence. The system of caste also has its imperfections, but on the brighter side, it served the Indian society for thousands of years.

With the advent of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, the concept of caste and its importance in performance of duty to attain perfection has undergone a complete change. Caste barriers are now breaking down, and one can aspire to attain the Highest by doing the duty that he takes up in a detached way. Surrender of the fruit of action to the Lord, however, continues to be the all important condition for spiritual growth and success.

Perfection through Karmayoga (sl 49-53): Freedom from action is perfection. This is attained when a person's mind is not attached to anything, who has subdued his emotions, who is free from longing, and who renounces everything knowing that the Self is one with the actionless Brahman.

Knowledge of Brahman is the consummation of true knowledge. It is then that one's mind dwells unceasingly on Brahman. This is attained when one is endowed with a pure understanding, subdues the mind with a firm resolve; turns away from sound and other objects of the senses; gives up likes and dislikes; lives in solitude, eats lightly, controls the mind, speech, and organs of action, is ever absorbed in meditation, cultivates freedom from passion; and, gives up egotism, power, pride, lust, anger, and proprietorship. It is thus that one becomes peaceful, free from the petty ego, and becomes worthy of becoming one with Brahman.

Result of Brahmajnana (sl 54- 56): Absorbed in Brahman, the Perfected one becomes serene. He now neither grieves nor desires, is impartial to all beings, and attains supreme devotion for God. This devotion for God gives him the knowledge of God -- who He is (Lord, the Absolute -- devoid of name and form), and what He is (Lord -- the essence of all that exists). Then, having known the true nature of God, he forthwith gets absorbed in Him. After this, even if that person stays engaged in any kind of action, he reaches the eternal and Imperishable Abode of the Lord by His grace.

It can thus be seen that the paths of knowledge, devotion and action lead to the same goal -- realisation of God as one with the Absolute, non-dual Brahman. Both the devotees and jnanis have the same kind of realisation -- Jnanis realise Brahman and then attain devotion; devotees attain devotion and then attain the realisation of Brahman.

Self Surrender and duty (57- 60): The Lord then advised Arjuna to surrender all his actions to Him, to regard Him as the Supreme Goal, to practise steadiness of mind, and to fix his heart on the Lord. He also cautioned Arjuna that if he fixed his heart on the Lord, then he would overcome every difficulty; but if due to self conceit he disregarded the Lord's words, then Arjuna was sure to perish utterly. If out of pride Arjuna was to think that "he would not fight", then that resolve would be vain and useless, since his very nature would compel him to fight. "Bound by your own karma, O Arjuna, which is

born of your very nature, what you do not want to do through delusion (i.e., run away from battle), you shall be forced to do even against your will."

In this way, the Lord cautions everybody that there is no way that a person can escape his nature. So the best way to lead one's life is to perform one's duty, and surrender its results to the Lord.

The Yoga of Surrender (sl 61- 66): The Lord dwells in the hearts of all beings, and by His maya causes them to revolve as marionettes mounted on a machine. (Also please see notes on IX . 7-10). So, Sri Krishna asks Arjuna to take refuge in Him whole heartedly. Only then he could hope to gain supreme peace by His grace.

Having told all this, the Lord says, 'I have expounded the profoundest of wisdom to you; now you do what you wish to do". Thus, the ultimate responsibility of following the right course of action lies with the individual only.

Out of compassion for Arjuna (and the mankind) the Lord once again sums up his words in brief for his benefit. The Lord says, 'Fix your heart on Me, love Me, worship Me, bow down before Me, and you shall come to Me. This is My pledge to you, for you are dear to Me. Abandon all kinds of dharma (i.e. give up attachment to all actions, good or bad) and come to Me alone for shelter. I will rescue you from all sins; do not grieve."

Technically this verse (18.66) marks the end of Gita. The verse sums up the essence of all spirituality, all religion, the Vedas, and the Gita -- 'Give up all, and come to the Lord'. Through the huge mass of philosophy discussed in Gita, the nature of multiplicity, its cause, its effect in the form of action and desires, and the way to end it through attaining the knowledge of oneness has been discussed. That very thing has been summed up here.

The glory of Gita (67- 71): Being a highly respected spiritual treasure, this knowledge must not be passed on to someone who is not austere in life, has no devotion, does not want to hear about it, or is a hater of God. But he who teaches this deeply profound philosophy to those persons who are devoted to the Lord, he would surely reach God. Such teachers of Gita are the most dear to the Lord. And, he who studies this sacred Gita with devotion, he would be worshipping the Lord through knowledge as sacrifice (see IV. 24-33). Even those who merely hear this work with faith, would be liberated from sin and attain the happy regions of the righteous after death.

The end (72-78): The Lord then asked Arjuna if he had heard his words with undivided attention, and if Arjuna's delusion, born of ignorance was destroyed. Arjuna gratefully answered that his delusion was gone, he had regained his former strength and vigour through His grace. He was now free from doubt and firm in resolve. Arjuna assured Sri Krishna that he would act as told.

Concluding the work, Sanjay, the minister-charioteer of king Dhritarashtra, exclaimed at his good fortune -- brought about by Vyasa -- for having heard and reported the dialogue between Arjuna and Lord Krishna. He expressed his joy again and again, and concluded with the words, ' The side that has Krishna -- the Lord of Yoga, and Arjuna -- the holder of the ferocious bow, Gandiva -- there surely will be fortune, victory, prosperity, and righteousness. Such is my conviction.'

Thus ends Gita.

Essentials of Hinduism

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[This work is a shorter but complete version of the book, "The Hindu Way" brought out by M/S Pan Macmillan]

Basics

Hinduism is based on the spiritual principles and realisations of the sages, which over the length of time got recorded in the books called the Vedas. Unlike other religions, it has no human founder, and hence its date of origin can never be fixed; it has existed since the dawn of spiritual thoughts in the world. Although the term "Hindu" is of relatively late origin, it has been accepted to signify the religion of the ethnic Indians and their spread wherever in the world.

Hinduism does not claim any exclusive right over the spiritual truths it preaches, and it believes that a person can reach the spiritual goal through any path. This makes it accept every faith and religion with respect. Inclusiveness and universal acceptance, both as spiritual and social truth are the characteristic of Hinduism.

Who is a Hindu?

Being an ultimate inclusive religion, it is difficult to define Hinduism the way Islam or Christianity can be. However, for the sake of convenience, a Hindu is expected to have these core convictions:

1. Acceptance of the spiritual truths as preached in the Vedas, and elaborated in any of the sacred books of the Hindus.
2. The belief in the transmigratory nature of the individual soul till it attains mukti. This is the state of freedom from every kind of duality like birth and death, good and bad.
3. Acceptance of different paths of religions as ways to perfection.

In matters of religious and social practices, Hindus go by what the elders of the society practise.

a. Sacred Books

The Fountainhead of Hinduism: The Vedas

Hinduism is based on the teachings of the Vedas. These sacred books are the most ancient preserved literature of the world, and it is difficult to say when exactly these works were composed. According to educated guess, these are more than seven to eight thousand years old.

The contents of these books are the records of the spiritual realisation of the sages of that period. Some of the mantras of the Vedas, including the Gaytri mantra are quite popular and are recited regularly by millions.

The Vedas are also called Shruti (lit. heard), since they were passed down from the teacher to the disciple orally, and were considered too sacred to be written down. These are four in number: Rigveda, Samveda, Yajurveda, Atharva Veda. This division is based on poetic metres: Rigveda is in rik metre (a particular Vedic metre), Samaveda can be sung, Yajurveda is in Yajus metre (used as mantras during yajna), and Atharva Veda has composition both in prose and poetry.

Everything of Hinduism can be traced back to the Vedas. They contain spiritual truths, philosophy, devotion, mythology, rituals, code of conduct, ethics, poetry etc. Sages and philosophers of later ages elaborated the ideas expressed in the Vedas to enrich various class of literature.

The religious and social practices of the Hindus keep changing with time, but the eternal spiritual principles, as recorded in the Vedas, continue to be the same. This unique style of dynamic equilibrium gives Hinduism an orthodox core, but a flexible external.

Other Sacred Books

For thousands of years Hindus have been discussing and explaining various aspects of religion which has resulted in a huge mass of religious literature. The more important of these books are:

Upanishads: These are the last sections of the Vedas, but because of their special philosophical nature and importance, these are treated separately. These books contain the philosophical truths realised by the sages, which now form the philosophical base of Hinduism. The most important of these truths is the Oneness of everything -- sarvam khalu idam Brahma, and that the individual is one with the universal -- aham Brahma asmi.

It is believed that there are one hundred and eight Upanishads, but ten of them are more famous.

Epics: Ramayana and Mahabharata: These are the two sacred epics that have served as the hope, ideal and inspiration of the Hindus. Of these, Ramayana centres the life of Sri Rama, while Mahabharata is woven around the story of Kaurava-Pandava clan in which Sri Krishna plays an important role. Through narration, these sacred books highlight the struggle of an individual in holding on to religious principles in good times and also during crisis. In addition, these contain most other issues concerning religious life.

Many classics have been composed in every Indian and many South East Asian languages based on these two sacred epics.

The Gita is the most popular Hindu sacred book that can be treated as the handbook of Hinduism. Composed in mere seven hundred verses, it is a small part of the Mahabharata, but it stands in its own majesty of poetry, philosophy and spirituality. Devout Hindus recite it daily as a source of inspiration, and also chant it when someone dies.

The Puranas are eighteen in number and form the mythological base of the Hindus. These have around 5.5 lakh verses through which the popular stories of gods and goddesses are described. The most popular of these books is Srimad Bhagavata Purana which deals mainly with the story of Sri Krishna. Shiva Maha Purana is another popular work centring Lord Shiva.

The Puranas were composed to suit the needs of the masses for an easy understanding of the spiritual truths. Despite their mythological nature, they discuss philosophy, ethics and rituals of the Hindus in detail.

The Smritis are the law books of the Hindus which prescribe the personal and social code. The rules laid down in these books cover practically everything -- starting from the most trivial daily acts of an individual, through the duties of a king, to the highest philosophical wisdom that one may require to lead a good life. The aim of these books is to take a person to the highest spiritual realisation.

Unlike the codes of other religions, Smritis are not the dictates of God, or any divine personality, and hence they do not have the same veneration as the scriptures, or as the codes as practised in other religions. Sages like Manu took the more prevalent practices of the society and then gave them a religious orientation so that people identify themselves not only with goodness, but with religiosity too. The sages made sure to keep their respective Smritis in tune with the principles of the Vedas, even though these were written for a particular period of time.

There are innumerable Smritis of which the most famous is Manu Smriti, written around the second century B.C.E. The sages knew that a society ruled by archaic laws becomes stagnant. So, new Smritis were codified from time to time according to the need of the age. Unfortunately, no new Smriti has been written in the last thousand years or so.

The Tantras are mostly about Mother Worship through the ritualistic aspect of religion. Some of these books are devoted to Lord Shiva, and the rest are devoted to Shakti, the female principle of God. These books discuss ways and means to please Shakti so that one can attain the desired in life. However, some of the practices of Tantra do not meet social approval, and hence these are not as popular as other sacred books.

Most Hindu rituals are derived either from the Puranas or from Tantra traditions.

In addition to these, there are thousands of books which serve as the basis for various sampradaya (religious sects) of the Hindus.

b. Principles of Hinduism

Aim of Hinduism

The fundamental principle of Hinduism has been to lead a person towards mukti (freedom). But because not everyone is capable of taking up this great idea, Hinduism helps people improve their quality of life by having an ideal. There are four of these, popularly known as Purusartha (goals of life).

- a. Dharma, Righteous living that results in a more meaningful life.
- b. Artha, Acquisition of wealth through rightful means.
- c. Kama, Enjoyment without transgressing the social and religious norms.
- d. Moksha, Liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

The first of these three are for the householders, and the fourth one, spirituality, is for the tyagi (renunciates). It is expected that every Hindu would give up worldly attachments at some point of time to devote themselves fully to spirituality.

God

The supreme Reality in Hinduism is known as Sat-Chit-Ananda (Existence, Consciousness and Bliss), which carries two ideas -- the impersonal, and the personal. The Impersonal God is ever present and everywhere present God for whom no adjective can be employed. He is infinite, ever free, without a form, and beyond the grasp of the human mind. This aspect of God is also

known as nirguna nirakara Brahman (without any qualifying traits and form). This aspect of God can be experienced only in the highest non-dual state of meditation.

When this same Reality is perceived through mind, keeping one's individuality intact but pure, It is known as Saguna Sakara Brahman (God with form and qualities, or simply God), who is merciful, powerful, and with innumerable noble qualities. He is the omnipresent creator, preserver, and destroyer of everything.

In essence, both these aspects of God are same, but people want to perceive them differently according to their mental makeup.

The Divinities

The Personal aspect of God is worshipped by the Hindus in His different forms. Of these, Brahma is accepted as the Creator, Vishnu as the sustainer, and Shiva as the destroyer of the universe, although in essence they are same. Vishnu is also known as Narayana who is described as having incarnated many times in various forms. Two of His popular human incarnations are Rama and Krishna. The present day Hinduism worships mainly four forms of God: Vishnu, Shiva, Rama, and Krishna.

The creative principle of God is known as Shakti, the power of God. Also known as Mother, this aspect of God is worshipped variously as Durga, Kali, Lakshmi and others. Independent of these, Saraswati is universally worshipped as the goddess of learning.

In addition to these, there are millions of gods and goddesses who represent the various aspects of divinity. According to some, there are in total thirty three crore (three hundred and thirty million) of them, which allows a Hindu to choose a God of his liking.

Maya

Why and how God creates this universe, is a problem that has baffled philosophers since ancient times. For Hindus also, Creation is a mystery of God that cannot be satisfactorily explained. Different philosophers offer different theories, but the most popular of them is the theory of Maya, according to which, God creates the Universe with the help of His own inscrutable Maya (the great divine power), which by its very nature cannot be described.

Maya is the Divine Ignorance which exists both at individual and cosmic level. Maya is responsible for the wrong perception that people have regarding the

presence or absence of a thing. Also, the continuance of the universe is due to Maya; and time, space, events, name and form are all products of Maya.

Maya exists only till one does not realise the Spiritual Truth. Thus, it exists and yet it does not exist. It can be compared with the darkness of night that makes objects invisible, or makes them appear differently. When one wants to see this darkness with the help of the darkness, it cannot be seen; and when one wants to see it with the help of light, it vanishes. Just like that, maya cannot be seen through maya, and it ceases to exist when the divine light of knowledge dawns upon a person.

The existence of maya as real, unreal, or part real is accepted by most Hindu philosophers, but they differ about its exact nature. This gives rise to many schools of thoughts in Vedanta.

Creation

Hindus believe that life is eternal, and that it did not spring out of nothing at some point of time, as science and many religions will have us believe.

The most popular theory of creation is that it comes into existence by the will of God through Maya, and what we call Creation, is in reality projection. Nature (called variously as maya, Prakriti, and Shakti) is without beginning and without end. At some point of time this gross universe goes back to its finer state, remains there for a certain period, and then once again gets projected to manifest all that is there in the nature. This cyclic creation-dissolution has continued since eternity, and would continue eternally.

Two theories are advanced to explain the process of Creation. According to one, the will of God creates Brahma, who gets down to the job of creation by meditating on the principles and process of Creation that was there in the previous cycle. With time, the creation blooms in all its majesty.

The second popular theory with the philosophers is that there is Prakriti, the Universal Mother Nature, which is composed of inertness (tamas), activity (rajas), and purity (sattva) in balance. For a divine mysterious reason, whenever an imbalance takes place in the triad of these qualities, they start combining with each other to give birth to more and more gross objects till the subtle aspects of earth, fire, water, space, and air are produced. These five are not the physical objects that one sees, but are finer, and are at the root of everything that is there in the universe. The final creation of the objects of this universe proceeds from the combination of these five elements in a set order, and every object of the universe, including the mind, contains these five elements in varying proportion.

Incarnation

God is beyond Creation and causation, but He expresses Himself in various forms, including human beings to give a push to spiritual evolution through His divine powers. This is known as avatara. Whenever God incarnates, He gives the knowledge of spiritual path best suited for that age. It is then that people with devotional inclination feel the warmth of Lord's love, compassion, majesty etc., and then turn towards Him with intensity.

God would continue to incarnate till there is creation and created beings.

Atman

Vedanta, the founding philosophy of the Hindus, is developed on the texts of Upanishads, Gita, and Brahmasutras, according to which, the supreme Reality, known as Brahman, alone exists -- Sarvam khalvidam Brahma. At the micro level, Brahman is known as Atman, the conscious principle present in every living being, and so by its very nature Atman can neither be created, nor destroyed. It has all powers, purity, omnipresence, and is full of all knowledge. But due to maya, Atman mistakenly identifies itself with the body, mind and senses. It is then that it becomes transmigratory, and is known as jivatman, which is equivalent to the popular idea of the soul.

The jivatman identifies itself with various kinds of action and their results, and thus goes on creating karma -- good and bad. These karma cloud the pure nature of Atman, and make him forgetful of its true nature, making it enjoys and suffer in the world. However, since the atman is infinite and eternal, it passes and evolves through various bodies and finally attains perfection and freedom.

There are three major approaches in Vedanta philosophy that discuss the nature of Atman. According to Advaita Vedantins, Atman is identical with the Supreme Reality, Brahman; and the multiplicity that is seen everywhere is not real, but is imaginary due to Maya. For many other sages, Atman is related to God in the same way as a leaf is connected with a tree. This view is called Visishta Advaita, which was popularised by Ramanujacharya. According to some others, Atman and God are two eternally separate beings and they have the relationship as between a servant and his master. This is called Dvaita, popularised by Madhvacharya.

Hinduism accepts that the true individuality of a person does not lie with his body or the mind, but with Atman; and the real consciousness does not belong to the mind, but to the Atman. It is the reflected consciousness of the Atman in the mind (which serves like a mirror) that makes one perceive and

know the objects of the world. When one's mind is cleansed through sadhana, it serves as a perfect reflector of the spiritual reality.

Karma

The most profound doctrine of the Hindus is the Law of Karma, according to which 'one gets what one earns', and, what one thinks is as important as what one does in shaping one's future.

This law implies that the disparity in the world amongst people is not an act of God, but is due to one's own doing. One thus has the freedom to change one's situation by performing right action, and thinking right thoughts. So, ideas like destiny, predestination and fate have no place in Hinduism. The grace of God, like the widespread rains, is everywhere, and one only has to make use of it through one's actions and thoughts to reap the benefit.

There is no historical point when the karma of an individual became operative; it is without beginning as maya and soul are. Like a flowing river, one may not know its source of origin, but one can go across it through spiritual practices.

Rebirth

One important fall out of the Law of Karma is the continuation of life in some form to work out one's karma. At the time of death, the individual Atman (jiva) leaves the body, along with the mind to take up a new body. Depending on one's actions and attitude, one may be born in any of the visible or invisible forms, but the best way to work out one's karma is through a human body.

The cycle of birth and death continues till one realises one's true nature as Atman. This knowledge is popularly known as Self realisation. The ultimate goal of Hindu religion is to take every person to that state of knowledge when one realises his nature and goes beyond the cycle of birth and death.

Heaven and Hell

Heaven and hell are places of temporary residence where the soul (which takes up a body suitable for the place to enjoy or suffer) lands in its journey towards mukti -- the final liberation from the law of karma. Since no one knows how these places look, the poets of the Puranas gave a free flight to their imagination to construct various heavens and hells, even though they do not have any significance in true spirituality.

Mukti

The goal of every soul is freedom from every kind of bondage. The ignorance, inherent in every mind about one's true nature (the eternally pure, conscious, and free atman), gives birth to identification with the non-eternal. This gives rise to desires to acquire the pleasurable, and run away from the unpleasant. This results in an individual's compulsion to act and work, which in turn causes more ignorance, more desires and more bondage. The cycle goes on.

The aim of Hinduism is to make a person conscious of this vicious cycle of ignorance-desire-action, which ultimately binds one to the law of karma and makes him suffer and enjoy variously. So, the spiritual practices in Hinduism are aimed at taking one beyond selfish action, and in making him absolutely unselfish. It is only then that one becomes fit for self realisation, which leads to mukti.

Jivanmukti

The greatest contribution of Hinduism has been the idea that a person can attain the highest state of realisation and go beyond pleasure and pain, sorrow and hope, heaven and hell, good and bad even while living. In that state one realises oneself to be one with the supreme Reality -- Aham Brahma Asmi – "I am the Supreme Reality". This is known as Jivanmukti – free while alive.

If not for anything else, the Hindu race must be preserved and respected for possessing this highest spiritual truth. The echo of this truth has been heard many a times in other religions too, but it has never entered the mainstream of any other religious thought.

Ethics

Hindu ethics is mostly elaborated in Smriti class of literature and deal with every possible issue that a person may come across in life. These codes of conduct are not based on what one sage said or did, but on the realistic ground of the ultimate spiritual truth of becoming all inclusive. The guiding principle behind these ethics and moral code is unselfishness. The goal of Indian spirituality is oneness, which implies that a person who is established in this knowledge, or wants to acquire this state, can never have emotions like jealousy, greed, ambition, hatred, etc., which are the signs of exclusiveness.

Sin

Sin, as a theological principle, does not play any role in Hinduism. The general term for it is adharma, to indulge in which implies transgression of certain code of conduct. Since these codes are not permanent in nature, transgressions can never be sin against God, as the term is generally understood. Sin is more like a mistake that can be corrected through penance and right action.

c. Practices

Philosophy

Philosophy is known as darshan (lit. to see) in Hindu religion. Speculative philosophy and word play is a strict no-no in it. A philosophy to be acceptable in Hinduism has to be based on the Vedas, and has to be preached by a sage. There are six such Vedic philosophies – Samkhya by Kapil, Yoga by Patanjali, Nyaya by Gautama, Vaisesika by Kanada, Mimamsa by Jaimini, and Vedanta by Vyasa. Of these, Vedanta has three major and some minor schools of thoughts, and it has come to be the chief philosophy of the Hindus.

Other than these Vedic philosophies, there is the Charvaka philosophy of the materialists, and some schools based on Shiva and Shakti.

Sects

Hinduism accepts inequality as a fact of existence. No two objects are identical, and no two minds can ever be same. So, the needs and aspirations of people can never be the same. Add to that a high number of sacred books, and a higher number of Divinities, and the result would be a very high number of paths of spirituality. In fact, as many persons, so many paths, is the approach of Hinduism. This results in a very higher number of sects in Hinduism as compared to other religions. Each of these sects has its own spiritual ideal, scripture, and practices. However, the ideals and scriptures of all these sects are based on the spiritual truths of the Vedas only.

Rituals and customs

Although many consider Hinduism to be a ritualistic religion, the fact is that rituals are a non essential thing in it. Rituals depend heavily on the local customs, and also on the sects to which one belongs. They are also dynamic in nature, and hence they cannot be universalised.

The general practice of a Hindu in religious matters is to follow the elders of the family or the society. Some Hindus outgrow these traditions and take up the practices of their Guru whom they choose as the spiritual guide.

In spite of all this variety, there are some practices which most Hindus adhere to. Respecting Ganga, repeating Aum, and performing Samskara (purificatory rites), and certain daily rituals, are some of the more popular practices.

Amongst the daily rituals, the most important is the performance of panch mahayajna (the five great daily sacrifices): Worship and meditation, offering to forefathers, serving the society, caring for animals and birds, and study of scriptures.

Symbol

Aum, written in Sanskrit, is the universal sacred symbol of Hinduism. It is the nearest equivalent of God, and through its three letters of composition, A, U, M, signifies everything that is there in the universe. It is believed that japam (mental repetition) of this symbol, and a meditation on it can get a person everything that he wants in this world, and this can also take a person to the highest spiritual realisation.

Worship

A common mind can identify itself with the great only through a concrete object. It is due to this that visiting sacred places and performing some form of worship or adoration is popular in every religion.

Hindus believe that God is present everywhere, and yet they worship anything that appeals to their mind. The object of worship ranges from rocks through trees to images. This sense of identifying God with external objects is not due to ignorance, but due to a strong feeling of seeing the manifestation of the Divine even in objects and images.

Ganesh, Vishnu, Shiva, Sun and Durga are known as Pancha devata and their worship is mandatory at the time of ritualistic worship.

Festivals

There are thousands of festivals in India to celebrate various occasions. But unlike in other religions, Hinduism does not have a set of universally fixed festivals for all. Different festivals are important to different people depending on the sect or the region to which they belong. However, Holi (the festival of colours), and Diwali (the festival of lights) have universal appeal amongst the Hindus. Shivaratri, Sri Krishna Janmashtami, and Ramanavami are also treated as festival days by most Hindus.

There are also sacred days like Ekadashi (eleventh day of the lunar fortnight), lunar and solar eclipse etc. on which special rituals are observed.

Food

Hindus have been quite fussy about the rightness of food over the ages, but the choice of food is local in nature. However, most Hindus (at least till now) avoid taking uchhista (food already taken by someone).

Castes

Since ancient times, Hindu religion has been wrongly tagged with the caste system. Caste is essentially a socio-economical system which was taken up by religion to detail svadharma (the duties of a person) for a smooth spiritual journey. The goal was to take the lowest in the social hierarchy slowly towards the highest spiritual ideals. But the plot was lost somewhere. Today caste system stands as the great blunder of the Hindu society that chose to neglect its masses.

Raja Yoga: Royal Road to Realisation

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What is Yoga?

Every religion is founded on the spiritual realisations of a prophet, or of sages. These founders set certain ideals for their followers, with the hope that they will attain the highest aim of their life by practising those ideals. However, with the passage of time these ideals get diluted due to wrong understanding of the ideal by the followers, or due to their overpowering desires for power and pelf.

When the dilution crosses a limit, the adherents either lose faith, or lose sight of the very purpose of religion. That is when emotionalism, irrationality, and fanaticism enter the religion. To stop this rot, it is essential that people have a science of spirituality, against which their own practices can be judged and set right.

Yoga is that science of spirituality. It is the purifying fire in which the garbage of a religion can be burnt down. Being the exalted art and the practical science of spirituality, it commands a special respect among all other paths to realisation. That is why it is also known as the royal road to realisation, Raja Yoga.

Yoga assumes nothing, accepts nothing that is wild, and tolerates no hocus pocus in its practice. It is not meant for the weak in the body, nor can it be practised by the weak in mind, resolve, or spirit. Even a little practise of it gives one concrete results, and opens higher doors to wisdom. And, what to say of practices, even a mere study of this science is capable of removing doubts and confusion from one's mind.

Derived from the root Yuj, the word 'Yoga' means union. But it is also used in a special sense by the practitioners of different paths of spiritual realisation. To a karma yogi, it signifies the union between an individual and the whole; to a Raja yogi (mystic), it means the union between his lower and the higher Self; to a bhakta, it implies the union between himself and God; and to a jnani, it stands for the non-duality of existence.

Raja Yoga is a fully developed philosophy, and is also a practical manual of spiritual practices, in which the focus is on maximising the use of psycho-physical faculties of a person for the realisation of the highest truth. Yogis

believe that by controlling one's body, and by focussing the mind, a practitioner can attain anything in life, including mukti. The most important of these manuals is Patmñjali's Yoga Sutras.

It is believed that Patanjali compiled the Yoga Sutras around 2nd/ 3rd century BCE. But, like all other Hindu sacred texts, the controversy rages as to its exact date. The practice of yoga was current in India much before Patanjali. References to this are present in the Upanishads, and elaborate discussions on it have been made in the Mahabharata. Patanjali only systematised the philosophy and wrote it down in sutra form. Needless to say, the work is a masterpiece of organising an extremely complex subject into a simple, graded and comprehensible discipline.

Since Raja Yoga deals with the mind, it is also known as Hindu psychology. But unlike the present day psychology, the discussion in Yoga is more thorough, meaningful and with a higher purpose. The analysis and remedy of spiritual issues presented here are non-sectarian in nature. This makes Yoga universally relevant and useful.

One branch of Yoga is called Hatha Yoga, in which emphasis is laid upon postures, purification of the body and nerves, and breath control. This kind of practise leads to a healthy body and long life, but does not lead to liberation. Due to this reason, many refuse to accept it as a valid branch of philosophy.

The Philosophy

The philosophy of yoga is based on the Samkhya philosophy, in which the most important concepts are those of the Purusha (soul), Prakriti (nature), and tattva (evolutes of Prakriti). Purusha is pure consciousness, whereas Prakriti is matter and energy, and is characterised by activity. This makes the character of Purusha and Prakriti the opposite. However, the process of creation continues only because these two come close together. Why and how this union takes place, is a mystery, which can best be speculated, and hence it is treated as irrelevant in yoga. This union between the matter and the spirit is accepted simply as a fact, and focus is laid upon getting out of this union, instead of finding out the reason for it. This approach makes Raja Yoga a practical philosophy.

Prakriti is composed of three gunas (lit. qualities, Sattva, Rajas, Tamas) which in turn give birth to elements of the universe and also produces the organs of perception, including the mind. In total there are twenty-four tattvas that belong to the realm of Prakriti: Mind, the ten organs, the five elements, the five tanmatras (from which are born the senses and elements), Cosmic Ego, Cosmic Mind, and the Prakriti Herself. All these manifestations of nature are caused by the evolution of nature, and hence no external agent is required to materialise it.

Prakriti has no intelligence of its own. As long as the Purusha is present in it, it appears as intelligent, which in reality is borrowed intelligence, the way a planet's light is actually the reflected light of the sun. Purusha is pure intelligence, but when it comes in contact with Prakriti, It starts experiencing the universe through the buddhi (intellect), which actually belongs to Prakriti. During perception of any kind by a living being, the senses carry the sensations to its mind, but it is the soul where all different perceptions converge, get unified, and he becomes aware of it. By nature the soul alone is free. People wrongly attribute freedom to the mind, and thus give rise to the false idea of the mind being intelligent.

The Yogi analyses both what is free and what is bound, and realises that the Purusha is free, and is the essence of that knowledge which, coming through the Buddhi, becomes intelligence. He also realises that the mind is bound, and that the goal of spiritual practices is to get out of the clutches of the Prakriti, which implies getting out of the mind's area of influence.

When in contact with Prakriti, Purusha forgets His divine nature, starts behaving like a bound entity, and looks at the nature with awe. When He starts experiencing the glamour of Prakriti and outgrowing it, He slowly starts moving towards that state of finality where the entire Prakriti appears small and insignificant to Him. It is then that the universe, as if, falls off from Purusha because of its nothingness. On the other hand, Prakriti has no purpose of its own, except to free the Purusha from Her clutches. This she does by taking Purusha through the experience of objects created by Her.

With this in the backdrop, Yoga philosophy prescribes that a yogi should train himself to outgrow the experiences offered by the nature to attain self knowledge, which is mukti.

Unlike Vedanta, in which there is one indivisible Atman, Yoga believes in infinite number of souls. According to Yoga philosophy, this is the reason why the liberation of one person does not liberate others.

Yoga philosophy makes only passing references to life after death. Concepts like heaven, hell, god, sin, etc. do not get much importance here. It is a practical philosophy, belonging to here and now, with the precision and clarity of a demonstrable experiment in a laboratory.

Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: The Book

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras belong to the sutra form of literature, which is a distinct type of composition based on short aphoristic statements. This form of literature was designed to be very short, as the texts were intended to be memorised by students in some of the formal methods of scriptural study. It is due to the Sutra form of literature that a vast mass of philosophical works was preserved in India.

Each sutra being highly condensed, another literary form arose in which commentaries on the sutras were added to clarify and explain them. The Yoga Sutras also have some famous commentaries, including one by Vyasa, and another by Bhoja, which makes the study of the subject complete.

Patanjali's Raja Yoga not only presents yoga as a thorough and consistent philosophical system, it also clarifies many important concepts, like karma, which are common to all traditions of Indian thought. Every later religious text of India, including Vedanta, was strongly influenced by the Yoga philosophy.

The book has 191 sutras, divided into 4 sections (Pada) as follows:

1. Samadhi Pada (51 sutras): It discusses the various superconscious states that an aspirant attains through meditation.
2. Sadhan Pada (55 sutras): It details the method of spiritual practices, known as Astanga Yoga.
3. Vibhuti Pada (55 sutras): The section deals with the various powers that one acquires during the practise of yoga. However, Patanjali cautions that aspirants must stay away from these, otherwise they won't be able to proceed towards the goal of mukti.
4. Kaivalya Pada (34 sutras): The section explains the state of liberation, and the ways to attain it through meditation.

The importance of mind in Yoga

We are what our thoughts are – Yoga philosophy uses this fundamental fact as its premise on which it builds its philosophy. So, we need to understand what these thoughts are, and how they work.

According to Swami Vivekananda, "...the eyes are only a secondary instrument, not the organ of vision. The organ of vision is in a nerve centre of the brain. The two eyes will not be sufficient. Sometimes a man is asleep with his eyes open. The light is there and the picture is there, but a third thing is necessary--the mind must be joined to the organ. The eye is the external instrument; we need also the brain centre and the agency of the mind. .. The mind takes the impression farther in, and presents it to the determinative faculty--Buddhi--which reacts. Along with this reaction flashes the idea of egoism. Then this mixture of action and reaction is presented to the Purusha, the real Soul, who perceives an object in this mixture.

"The organs (Indriyas), together with the mind (Manas), the determinative faculty (Buddhi), and egoism (Ahamkara), form the group called the Antahkarana (the internal instrument). They are but various processes in the mind-stuff, called Chitta. The waves of thought in the Chitta are called Vrittis (literally "whirlpool"). What is thought? Thought is a force, as is gravitation or repulsion. From the infinite storehouse of force in nature, the instrument called Chitta takes hold of some, absorbs it and sends it out as thought. ...

"So we see that the mind is not intelligent; yet it appears to be intelligent. Why? Because the intelligent soul is behind it. You are the only sentient being; mind is only the instrument through which you catch the external world. Take this book; as a book it does not exist outside, what exists outside is unknown and unknowable. The unknowable furnishes the suggestion that gives a blow to the mind, and the mind gives out the reaction in the form of a book, in the same manner as when a stone is thrown into the water, the water is thrown against it in the form of waves. The real universe is the occasion of the reaction of the mind. A book form, or an elephant form, or a man form, is not outside; all that we know is our mental reaction from the outer suggestion. "Matter is the permanent possibility of sensations," said John Stuart Mill. It is only the suggestion that is outside.

"Take an oyster for example. You know how pearls are made. A parasite gets inside the shell and causes irritation, and the oyster throws a sort of enamelling round it, and this makes the pearl. The universe of experience is our own enamel, so to say, and the real universe is the parasite serving as nucleus. The ordinary man will never understand it, because when he tries to do so, he throws out an enamel, and sees only his own enamel. Now we understand what is meant by these Vrittis. The real man is behind the mind; the mind is the instrument in his hands; it is his intelligence that is percolating through the mind. It is only when you stand behind the mind that it becomes intelligent. When man gives it up, it falls to pieces and is nothing. Thus you understand what is meant by Chitta. It is the mind-stuff, and Vrittis are the waves and ripples rising in it when external causes impinge on it. These Vrittis are our universe." (Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol 1. P. 200-2)

Yoga is about restraining the mind from acquiring various forms, which it keeps doing all the time. It is through this restraining, with the help of meditative techniques, that one slowly learns to disassociate himself from everything around him. In the state of samadhi (the highest state of meditation), one becomes completely free from every kind of association and gets liberated from the cycle of birth and death. The resulting impression from samadhi obstructs every other impression of the mind accumulated over the ages. By the restraint of even this last impression (which obstructed all other mental impressions) comes the "seedless" Samadhi which destroys the possibility of any future birth. It is in this state that the spiritual aspirant gets established in his true state of existence (svarup). This is mukti; this is the goal of yoga.

As in Vedanta, Yoga philosophy also accepts that consciousness belongs to Purusha (soul) only. Everything else is the evolute of Prakriti, and hence not self luminous. Since mind also belongs to Prakriti, it is not self-luminous, and so it does not have inherent intelligence. This is the core of Yoga psychology.

The mind gets its reflected intelligence from Purusha, and gets coloured by the impurities born of its contact with the sense objects. The goal of Yoga is to cleanse the mind so that the pure light of intelligence from Purusha dawns upon it and leads it to realisation. That is when the soul becomes free from the snares of Prakriti.

Normally, the mind stays in one of these states -- kshipta, scattering; vikshipta, darkening; vimudha, gathering; niruddha, one-pointed, and ekagra, concentrated. The first state is of activity and manifests in the form of pleasure or of pain. The second one corresponds to dullness which tends to injure others. These two states are predominant in the demons. The third kind of mental state is natural to the demigods and the angels. The gathering form (niruddha) is when the mind struggles to centre itself on one object. This state is commonly found in gods. The last state, the one-pointed (ekagra) form, is when the mind tries to concentrate, and finally the concentrated form results in Samadhi. The samadhi is the state when mind cannot acquire one of its above mentioned five states. The mind is finite and hence can not reach or grasp the knowledge of the Infinite attained in the state of samadhi.

Mind and its forms: The Vrittis

Every functional mind stays in a particular state, characterised by thoughts. The modification that a mind undergoes due to any reason, is called vritti. According to Patanjali, Yoga is the conscious stopping of every vritti of the mind (Su. I. 2).

Whatever the type of mind (kshipta, vikshipta, vimudha, niruddha, ekagra), it belongs to one of the five mental states:

a. Pramana: Right knowledge acquired through direct perception, reasoning, inference, and through sacred texts and words of teachers.

b. Viparyaya: Indiscrimination, which gets born due to a mistaken identity, as when one sees a mirage.

c. Vikalpa: Verbal delusion is about the words which have no corresponding reality. For example, A person reacts when he is called a donkey, although the word has no corresponding reality with the truth.

d. Nidra: The state of sleep and dream.

e. Smriti: Memory. It can come from direct perception, false knowledge, verbal delusion, or sleep.

The goal for a yogi is to get out of all these mental states and stop the vrittis associated with them. This requires great practice and perseverance for a long time. The Yoga Sutras discuss the ways, means and the result of the conscious control of the mind.

Ashtanga Yoga: The Eight Steps

The eight "limbs" or steps prescribed in the Sadhan Pada of the Yoga Sutras are: Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi. Of these, the first five are called external aids to Yoga (bahiranga sadhana), and the last three are called internal aids to Yoga (antaranga sadhana).

Yama refers to the five abstentions: Ahimsa: non-violence, Satya: truth in word & thought, Asteya: non-covetousness or non-stealing, Brahmacharya: celibacy, Aparigraha: Non-acceptance of gifts. Patanjali adds that even for any non-spiritual person, these are great ethical values, and should be practised by all.

Niyama refers to the five observances: Shaucha: cleanliness of body and mind, Santosha: satisfaction with what one has, Tapas: austerities, Svadhyaya: Scriptural study and introspection, and Ishvarapranidhana: surrender to (or worship of) God.

Asana: It is training oneself into the correct posture for meditation. One should be able to sit comfortably and firmly for long hours in one posture, and hence that posture which is the easiest for one should alone be chosen.

Pranayama: It is the technique of regulating the breath to conserve the psychic energy, called prana, and helps in concentrating the mind. Pranayama is divided into Rechaka (exhaling), Puraka (inhaling), and Kumbhaka (restraining). One complete cycle of these three is called Pranayama. In one Pranayama one may repeat three Gayatris, or an equivalent number of any sacred mantra. However, breathing is only one of the many ways through which one can attain concentration.

Pratyahara: It is the withdrawal of senses and finally the mind from the external objects. According to yoga, an organ is only the external manifestation of the mind to do a particular work.

Dharana: It is the concentration of the mind upon a physical object, such as a flame of a lamp, or the image of a deity by fixing the mind on the lotus of the heart, or on the centre of the head. The practise of this gives rise to a particular kind of mental waves which are not swallowed up by other kinds of thoughts (vrittis), but by degrees become prominent, while all the others recede and finally disappear.

Dhyana: When the multiplicity of the waves born during dharana gives place to unity, and only one wave is left in the mind, it is called Dhyana. However, in this state the act of meditation and the object of meditation remain distinct and separate.

Samadhi: When all forms are given up by the mind during meditation, and the focus is only on the meaning of the object of meditation, thus becoming one with it, it is called Samadhi. In this state, no distinction remains between the act of meditation, and the object of meditation. The mind now goes beyond the limits of reason, and comes face to face with facts which perception, instinct, reason, or testimonies can never reveal.

Types of Samadhi

If the mind can be fixed on a particular point for twelve seconds it is called a Dharana. Twelve such Dharanas make a Dhyana, and twelve such Dhyanas is a Samadhi. The three together make a samyama.

Samadhi is of two kinds: Samprajnāta Samādhi, and Asamprajnāta Samādhi.

A. Samprajnāta Samadhi: Conscious samadhi. In this type of samadhi, the mind remains concentrated on the object of meditation, and hence the consciousness of the object of meditation persists. In the Samprajnata Samadhi, all the powers of controlling the nature come. However, despite attaining all the powers through this kind of samadhi, a yogi can again fall back to the state of bondage, since this is not the ultimate state.

The resulting vritti from this kind of samadhi suppresses every other vritti of the mind. It then becomes easy to suppress this vritti too, to attain the ultimate knowledge.

This samadhi is again of four kinds:

1. Savitarka: The mind is concentrated upon a gross object of meditation, such as a flame. In the very same meditation, when one struggles to take the elements out of time and space, and think of them as they are, it is called Nirvitarka, without question.

2. Savichāra: The mind is concentrated upon the subtle aspect of the component of that object, called the tanmatras. When in the same meditation one eliminates time and space, and thinks of the fine elements as they are, it is called Nirvichara, without discrimination.

3. Sānandā: The concentration here is upon a still subtler object of meditation, like the senses, or the thinking organ, chitta. When the thinking organ is thought of as bereft of the qualities of activity and dullness, it is then called Sananda, the blissful Samadhi.

4. Sāsmitā: The mind is concentrated upon the ego-substance with which the self is generally identified. When the mind itself is the object of meditation, which now becomes very ripe and concentrated, and all ideas of the gross and fine materials are given up, then it is called Sasmita Samadhi. Persons who attain this state are known as Videha, without a gross body. Those yogis, who belong to this state, and get merged in nature without attaining mukti are called Prakritilayas. Those who do not stop even there, attain mukti.

B. Asamprajnāta Samadhi: This is the Perfect Superconscious state that leads to mukti. In this state the mind and the object of meditation become one, and all mental modifications are checked (niruddha). In the earlier kind of samadhi, the latent impressions (in seed form) may continue, but when Asamprajnata is reached, the Samadhi becomes seedless. There are no more seeds in the mind out of which can be manufactured this plant of life, this ceaseless cycle of birth and death. In this state all old tendencies of restlessness, dullness, and also goodness get destroyed. The good and evil tendencies suppress each other, leaving the Soul in its own glory.

The Process of Knowledge

Every knowledge requires Shabda (sound/any external signal), Artha (meaning), and Jnana (knowledge). The signal coming from the external word is known as shabda. The brain receives the signal and processes it for the use of mind; the process is known as artha. When the mind grasps the meaning of the shabda, it throws out its individualised reaction towards the object from which came the signal. This is jnana. These three are distinct processes, but get mixed up in such a fashion as to stay indistinct to a common man. One perceives only their combined effect, known as external object. But, a yogi who has attained a level of meditation can distinguish the three, and when he applies this power of discrimination to various areas of knowledge, he can attain various powers.

Kriya Yoga: The First steps of Growth

For any practitioner of Yoga, benefit comes in two forms :

1. Attainment of Samadhi, and
2. Reduction and control of pain (both physical and mental).

The cause of pain lies in five pain bearing factors: ignorance, egoism, attachment, aversion, and clinging to life. Ignorance (of one's true nature) is the cause of the other four. Egoism is caused when the senses meet the sense objects; attachment is towards pleasurable objects, aversion is towards unpleasant things, and clinging to life is something common to all living beings. Thus starting from self-preservation to the primordial ignorance, a person has enough grounds that can give birth to any type of pain.

Yoga teaches how to destroy the root of these pain bearing causes. These are:

- a) Tapas -- practice of austerities
- b) svadhyaya -- study and repetition of the mantra
- c) Surrendering fruits of work to God (Isvara Pranidhāna). These are also the three Niyama, explained earlier.

Karma, Virtue, Sin, and Rebirth

Yoga propounds the concept of karmāshaya (receptacle of works, sum total of samskaras). Samskaras are the mental tendencies which are left behind after a work is complete. For example, when a person acts out of anger, the samskaras related to anger are left behind in the mind. These samskaras, in turn, produce new actions, just as a seed produces a tree. The karmashaya has its root in the pain-bearing obstructions, as mentioned above. These karma work out in this visible life, or in the unseen future life. The seed, in the form of samskara being there, the fruition comes in the form of species, life, and experience of pleasure and pain.

They bear fruit as pleasure or pain, caused by virtue or vice in this life, and get worked out through different bodies, higher or lower, in the next life. Thus a person engaged in cruel acts may be born as a vicious animal in the next birth to work out his samskaras of cruelty which could not be worked out in this life. The wise man sees through pleasure and pain, and knows that they come to all, and that one follows and melts into the other. So, they try to get out of both pleasure and pain by avoiding misery which is not yet come. With the past karma already worked out, and the present working out, it is only future ones that can be controlled. This is the only way to hasten the process of growth.

Good and bad deeds are not the direct causes in the transformations of the nature of a person, but they act only as breakers of obstacles to his evolution, just as a farmer breaks the obstacles to the course of water in his fields. Once the barrier is broken, the water runs down by its own nature (Su. IV. 3). So, when a wicked person decides to be good and saintly, he only has to break the barriers to let the good actions flow in, which are always in wait to have a free flow. This breaking can be done only by good deeds. The same rule applies to any kind of tendency. In the ultimate state of liberation, the purity and knowledge flows in the mind of their own, since they are the true nature of soul. This means that liberation is not a product of meritorious acts, but is the natural state of the soul.

Desires and karma can work out only in the right environment with the help of right body. This means that the unfulfilled desires and unfinished karma would remain stored up, waiting for the proper environment, and the proper body. This results in rebirth, and also makes the cycle of birth and death continue. To get out of this, one has to destroy the seeds of karma that are stored up which can be done with the help of meditation and the practise of values.

God in Yoga

In the Yoga philosophy, God (Ishwara) is a special soul (Purusha), untouched by misery, actions, their results, and desires. Interestingly, Samkhya philosophy, on which Yoga is based, does not accept the existence of God in any form.

The Isvara (god) of the Yogis is not same as God, the Creator of the universe, as is commonly understood in religion. According to Yoga, the creation is the work of Prakriti, and hence Isvara has nothing to do with Creation. According to them, Isvara is the Soul with unlimited knowledge, and is also the Teacher of teachers. The worldly teachers are all limited, but He is the Teacher of infinite knowledge. His manifesting word is Aum, and one can attain samadhi by repeating the sacred Aum, and by thinking on its meaning. One may also get the same results by meditating on God.

Problems and how to counter them

Disease, mental laziness, doubt, lack of enthusiasm, lethargy, clinging to sense-enjoyments, false perception, non-attaining concentration, and falling away from the state when obtained, are the chief obstructions in the path of yoga. Also, when the practice of yoga has been misdirected, the result is grief, mental distress, tremor of the body, irregular breathing, accompany non-retention of concentration. However, they are not dangerous, and one can take steps to cure them. Incidentally, these also trouble a common man. Yoga looks at the very root of these problems and offers ways to counter them.

According to yoga, there are five sources of pain, which are at the root of every conceivable problem that a common man, and also a yogi face. These are – avidya (ignorance about one's true divine nature), asmita (identification with objects around himself), raga (attachment), dvesha (aversion), and abhinivesha (strong sense of clinging to life).

To counter the pains born of these five, one should practice maitri (friendship with all those who are happy), karuna (compassion to all those in misery), mudita (joyfulness towards all that is good), and upeksha (indifference towards the bad). Whenever the yogi feels disturbed, he should direct these counter feelings towards the objects from where the disturbance is coming. These practices pacify the mind, and make it fit for higher achievements.

Steps of Growth

The growth of a yogi comes in seven stages:

1. The restlessness of the mind to know a thousand things of the world stops. The conviction comes to mind that what was to be known, has been known.

2. The mind goes beyond feeling pain at anything of the universe. Nothing can hurt him any more.
3. One becomes a sarvajna (attains full knowledge).
4. There is a complete drop of the sense of duty towards anything in the world.
5. The mind becomes completely free of any kind of agitation. Like a stone fallen on the ground that can never go up the mountain peak again, the mind becomes permanently restful.
6. A complete control over mind comes, which means that it can be resolved back to its ultimate cause, Prakriti.
7. One finally gets established in one's Self.

Powers that a Yogi gains

Yoga declares that all power of the universe flows from the mind, be it individual, or universal (mahat). A Yoga practitioner can gain any number of powers simply by practising the related disciplines. It may be noted that these powers have actually been seen manifested in great yogis. According to Patanjali, the Siddhis (powers) are attained by birth, chemical means, power of words, mortification, or concentration. He also adds that among all, the mind which has attained to Samadhi, alone is the highest. A person attaining powers through medicines, words of blessings, or mortifications, still has desires, but that man who has attained Samadhi through concentration is free from all desires, and hence superior to all.

Some of the powers that a yogi can attain are:

- * All enmities and violence cease in presence of the yogi who is established in Ahimsa (non violence).
- * A yogi established in truthfulness, can get for himself or others, anything that he desires; established in non-stealing, one gets all the wealth; when established in continence, one gets unsurpassed energy; established in non-acceptance of gifts, a yogi gets the memory of his previous lives; from contentment comes happiness; by repetition of a mantra comes the realisation of that particular deity.
- * All knowledge comes to a yogi who succeeds in attaining samyama (the three--Dharana, Dhyana, and Samadhi--together). He can even understand the language of animals and birds by distinguishing between Shabda (sound), Artha (meaning), and Jnana (knowledge).
- * By applying samyama on the bodily signs of others, a yogi can know the nature of that person's mind.
- * A yogi can become unseen if he wishes so, by making samyama on his body.
- * By focussing on the strength of an elephant (or any other such animal), a yogi gains that kind of strength. This also explains why one should be careful about the company one keeps.

- * Focussing on the sun, the moon, and the pole star one gains the knowledge of the world, the stars, and the celestial motions respectively.
- * By focussing on the higher states of mind (sattva), one gets supernatural hearing, touching, seeing, tasting and smelling; By focussing on the throat, one controls hunger; by focussing on the heart, one gets the knowledge of the minds.
- * It is easy for a yogi to walk on water, thorns etc. He can move at the speed of the mind, become small, become heavier than a mountain, look exceptionally beautiful, and can get surrounded by light.

Patanjali, however, cautions that these are powers in the worldly state, but are great obstacles to the attainment of the highest samadhi, which brings liberation.

Mukti

When the soul realises that it depends on nothing in the universe, and desires nothing, then It attains Kaivalya (lit. uniqueness, freedom) and perfection. This comes when the intellect (sattva), which usually is a mixture of purity and impurity, has been made as pure as the Purusha itself. It is then that the Sattva reflects only on real purity, and an aspirant realises that he had neither birth nor death, nor need for heaven or earth. He realises that he neither came nor went, it was nature which was moving, and that movement was reflected upon the soul.

Swami Vivekananda explains liberation:

"Nature's task is done, this unselfish task which our sweet nurse, nature, had imposed upon herself. She gently took the self-forgetting soul by the hand, as it were, and showed him all the experiences in the universe, all manifestations, bringing him higher and higher through various bodies, till his lost glory came back, and he remembered his own nature. Then the kind mother went back the same way she came, for others who also have lost their way in the trackless desert of life. And thus is she working, without beginning and without end. And thus through pleasure and pain, through good and evil, the infinite river of souls is flowing into the ocean of perfection, of self-realisation." (Complete Works, Vol. I. 304.)

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Smritis: Way to Realisation through Good Conduct

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What are Smritis?

Every religion has philosophy, rituals, mythology, and code of conduct as the four pillars on which it stands. If any of these four pillars gets neglected, then that religion loses its vitality, and soon it degenerates either into fanaticism, or gets lost into oblivion. The four essential pillars of the Hindu religion are Vedanta (Upanishads), Tantras, Puranas, and the Smritis respectively.

These four pillars of Hinduism, however, have their source and sustenance in the Vedas only. The entire spiritual ideals, religion, and culture of the Hindu race are rooted in the Vedas, which are also known as Sruti. In essence, the Vedas contain the eternal principles, or the universal laws of both the external and the internal nature, and hence they show the ways to attain dharma, artha, kama, moksha -- the four purusartha (goals of life). Since the Vedas were inaccessible to the masses, and also there was a need for an elaboration of the statements made in these works, a new class of scriptures, called Smriti, was born. Thus works like Mahabharata, Ramayana, Purana, Dharma shastras (law books, also known as Smritis) are all Smritis.

The Vedas supply the framework of spiritual life, while the details of spiritual life are filled by the Smritis. So, even though the Smritis are important, they are considered inferior to the Vedas in matters of authority. If per chance a statement of Smriti appears to contradict the Vedas, then the words of Smriti gets overruled.

Smritis mean both the supplementary scriptures (i.e. Puranas, Itihasa etc.), and also the law books like Manu Smriti. Hereafter, this article uses the term Smriti to mean the dhrama shastras (Law books). These Smritis are the systemically arranged dharmas (code of conduct) scattered over the different texts of the Vedas. They supplement and explain the Vidhi (what one should do) and Nisedha (what one must not do) in the Vedas, which when followed properly can lead a person to the ultimate goal of life, which is liberation. These dharma also regulate Hindu national, social, family and individual obligations.

Smritis as Dharmashastra

The Vedas have six auxiliary literature (grammar, prosody etc.) like their limbs (anga), and hence are known as Vedanga. These are considered very important for the study of the Vedas. Kalpa is one of them.

To help the Vedic priests perform the various details connected with a sacrifice, a kind of manual was worked out. With time each Veda had its own handbook of rituals written in a short form (sutra), or in metrical form. They came to be known as Kalpa. Of these Kalpa Sutras, the Sruta Sutras deal with the performance of the public sacrifices, and the Grihya Sutras deal with the ceremonies applicable to the domestic life of a man.

The Dharma Sutras are directly connected to the Grihya Sutras, and deal exclusively with dharma, which is defined as right, duty, law, religion, custom, and usage. The Grihya Sutras prescribe forty ceremonies, known as samskara, for a person. These samskara govern his journey from birth to death. In later times, only sixteen of these remained popular, and in recent times, the number has gone down to ten.

Most of the Dharma Sutras originated in the Vedic schools, but some of them like Gautama Dharma Shastra, and Manu Smriti are independent works, although rooted in the Vedic tradition.

Laws, Commandments, Smritis

Before setting down a law or a constitution, the law maker has to decide the rationale behind those laws. For example, the main purpose behind any social or criminal law is to safeguard the interests of a community, whereas the religious commandments are aimed at making an ordinary person outgrow his savage nature. If there is no higher purpose behind a law, then that law becomes a wall of imprisonment, instead of being the wall of protection.

The most famous code of conduct from ancient times is the code of Hammurabi from Mesopotamia, which was written down in c. 1760 BCE. This work is one of the earliest available set of laws and is also the best preserved work of its kind. The famous sayings like "an eye for an eye" and "an arm for an arm" are based on Hammurabi's Code. Most other sets of laws come from a small geographical area of the Eastern world that had a similar culture and belonged to the same racial group. These sets of laws have a great similarity amongst them, and they seem to have been inspired by a common source. The earlier code of Ur-Nammu (21st century BCE), the Hittite code of laws (ca. 1300 BCE), and Mosaic laws (traditionally ca. 1400 BCE), are examples of this.

Laws given by Moses, more popularly known as Ten Commandments, has played a very important role in the Judeo-Christian world. Similarly the Laws given by Buddha, and Zarathurasthra have played a vital role in shaping the lives of their followers.

Smritis are neither mere law books, nor are they like the constitution of a country, or of an organised society. These are not even commandments, but are shastras, scriptures. Shashtra means 'that which governs', and is applied to a book only if it teaches the ways and means to attain mukti, the supreme goal of life. Books like Manusmriti are considered a shashtra because they teach how a person who performs his svadharma (duties) faithfully can attain self realisation.

The Celebrated Hindu Lawgivers

The Vedas are believed to be the words of God, channelled through the realisations of the sages. So the sages are not treated as their creators. On the other hand, Smritis are the creation of various sages. The principles of religion that are in the Vedas are unchangeable, but the religious practices that are based upon the social position and correlation have to change with the change in the society. For example, in matters of food, the climatic and other changes make it necessary to change the rules that govern them. Similar is the case with many such habits and practices. For this reason, the Smritis have varied from time to time, and place to place. Thus the Smritis of the various yugas like Satya Yuga and Treta yuga are different from each other. And since they are not absolute, Smritis are treated as secondary in importance to the Vedas.

From time to time, the great lawgivers amended the existing laws that had become obsolete. They made alterations, adaptations, readjustments, additions and deletions to suit the needs of the time so that a person could live his life in accordance with the Vedic ideals, despite the changed conditions.

There are eighteen main Smritis or Dharma Shastras: Manu, Yajnavalkya, Parasara. Vishnu, Daksha, Samvarta, Vyasa, Harita, Satatapa, Vasishta, Yama, Apastamba, Gautama, Devala, Sankha-Likhita, Usana, Atri and Saunaka. The Gautama Dharma Sutra, belonging to the tradition of Sama Veda is considered to be the earliest of its kind and must have been composed between 600 and 300 B.C. Another famous work, Apastamba Dharma Sutra belongs to Taittiriya recension of Yajur Veda.

Manu, Yajnavalkya and Parasara are the more celebrated lawgivers of the Hindus. The Hindu society is mostly governed by the laws made by these three great sages. Of them, Manu is the greatest, most authoritative and the

oldest lawgiver, and his work, Manusmriti, is the most famous law book of the Hindus. Yajnavalkya Smriti is next in importance to it. These two works are accepted throughout the country with respect and authority.

Philosophy of the Smritis

There is a very precise and clear philosophy of life, individual and social, behind the scheme of the Smritis. Like any other Hindu philosophy, these works treat the universe as a complete whole and pulsating with life. According to them, the manifestation of that life is not same everywhere: it sleeps in inert objects, is awake in plants, moves in animals, and is self-conscious in men. Man is considered to be the highest expression of life, but he can also evolve culturally (which includes spiritual growth). This evolution is possible through various means, of which the practise of one's dharma (prescribed duties) is the best.

The writers of Smritis accept inequality in the universe as an inviolable fact, and believe that the real equality is possible only at the spiritual level. So, they did not try to found a society on a theoretical possibility of equality, but struggled to work with individuals and groups that they had in hand. Also, they did not believe the inequality amongst men (the castes) to be real or even presumable. But to perform indispensable functions of the society, each person had to be assigned a fixed role according to certain criteria. These criteria were never fixed with the motive of greed or materialistic outlook. Instead, the existing social pattern and also the ultimate spiritual goal was always kept as the guiding principle of every Smriti.

The detailing of rules and laws in the Smritis is based on the validity of Varnashrama, and also on the inviolability of the law of karma, including rebirth. Without these foundations, the Dharma shastras are irrelevant. Hindu Smritis are meaningless for a society that does not accept life after death. They are also useless for people who do not accept the fact of potential equality at the level of spirituality, despite the prevailing inequality at the socio-economic level. Once these facts are accepted, then only a person learns to believe that the good or bad that comes in his life, is the result of his own past actions. To make an improvement from where he belongs, he himself has to make an effort. It is then that he realises the importance of his own freedom to regulate his conduct by rational volitions and power to conquer his impulses. This is where Smritis come to help.

Every religion expects its followers to adhere to the norms set by its scriptures. Gita says that while making a decision one must stick to what the scriptures say, 'Tasmat shastram pramanam te...' If an individual depends too much on his own judgement regarding correctness of an action, he may then get swayed by the impurities of his mind, and he may ultimately land into

serious trouble. Keeping this in view, Smritis codified every possible action of an individual in such a way that he did not have to think for himself what to do and what not to do. By simply obeying the commands of a Smriti, a person can outgrow his human limitations. In turn, the society also becomes stable when a majority practises these codes.

Smritis are not the high preachers of morality, nor do they take up a condescending moral stand by commanding 'Thou shall not...' These are also not like the absurd and cruel laws interpreted and dictated by the degenerates of religion. Rather, the writers of Smritis only codified what was being practised in the society by the majority of people of that period. It was obvious to the sages that to make the society run smoothly, it was necessary for all the members to follow a common code of conduct. So, whenever the society changed its habits and behaviour pattern due to changed circumstances, the sages noted them, and then codified them for everyone to follow. At the same time, they made sure that these laws did not go against the basic principles of the Vedas.

Smritis are older than the Puranas, and are possibly earlier than even the Epics, but they are not treated as sacred as them, nor are they as popular. The religious spirit which reached its acme in the Veda-Samhitas and Upanishads, found its popular expression in the Epics. Even the aspirations of the Indian minds are well articulated in them, but not so much in the Smritis, because these are in the form of legal texts on social conduct. However, the credit for the stability of the Hindu society, and the high moral standards of a Hindu have come entirely due to these Smritis.

Characteristics of Smritis

The chief characteristics of the Smritis can be summed up as:

- * They deal with topics under three main heads: acara (rites), vyavahara (dealings), and prayascitta (penances and expiation).
- * Both secular and religious laws are discussed, since these have been traditionally considered inseparable in India.
- * The duties of the Varnashrama Dharma are discussed in detail. Every individual is assigned a place in the society, and is given an appropriate duty. Compared to this, today's world is a place where everyone is rootless, and where everyone runs from the pillar to the post in search of stability.
- * The duties and responsibilities of the king (Raja dharma), rules for taxation, ownership, money-lending etc. have been discussed. Even the most powerful king was kept under check, and was not allowed to become a despot, only because of the influence of these Smritis.
- * Duties of women, and also the responsibilities towards them, have been discussed with care. Manusmriti says that 'the gods reside in the house where a woman is treated with respect.'

- * Various samskaras (sacramental rites) like upanayana, marriage etc. are discussed. Smritis assert that only by purifying oneself through these rites, a person can become fit for the ultimate realisation of the Self.
- * Punishment for various crimes have been recommended. These lawgivers believed that if a person was punished for his crime by the king, then he once again became as pure as ever. In case the guilty escaped the punishment, he had to suffer through various kinds of losses and diseases.
- * Rules about food, clothing, cleansing etc. have been discussed.
- * Prayascitta, the penances for sins and mistakes other than crimes, have been discussed.

Smritis take a commonsense view of the duties of man. They also object to taking of sannyasa by a person who has not fully performed his obligatory duties towards the world.

These books discuss six kinds of duties: Varna dharma (General caste duties), Ashrama dharma (General duties related to the station of life), Varna-Ashrama Dharma (based on the particular station of a particular caste), Nimitta dharma (penances), Guna Dharma (duties born of a particular position, eg. a king's), and Samanya (duties common to all). They lay down the laws that regulate national, communal, family and individual obligations in general (Samanya) as well as in particular (Visesha).

One very important concept of dharma developed in these works is the acceptance of a lower kind of dharma in which it is prescribed to act in one way, and a higher kind of dharma where staying away from that very act under certain conditions is considered more meritorious. For example, telling the truth is considered to be meritorious, but not telling the truth (when it is unpleasant) is considered to be more meritorious. Similarly, preaching dharma is meritorious, but not preaching dharma (when it harms or injures others) is considered to be more meritorious.

Manu Smriti

Manusmriti is the oldest and the most authoritative work amongst smritis. The first references of Manu and his heritage occurs in the Rig Veda. The Mahabharata also makes many references of the work by the great lawgiver, but the book is believed to have taken its final shape around second BCE. Considering many pros and cons, it is possible that the work was completed before Buddhism made roots in India.

Manu's statements are considered healthy and acceptable, and hence all later works were based on this work. Many great scholars and sages wrote commentaries on it. According to the Vedas, whatever Manu said is wholesome like medicine. The book was considered so useful that even the South-East Asian countries accepted the norms set by it.

Manusmriti has around 2700 shlokas, arranged in twelve chapters dealing with acara, vyavahara, and prayascitta. It is in the form of dialogue between Manu and his disciple Bhrigu in the presence of many other sages who wanted to know about dharma.

Manu's work begins with the exposition of the universal concept of Hindu philosophy that God alone exists. The Creation begins due to mysterious reasons, but is an act of God. The soul, which in essence is inseparable from God, identifies itself with matter and runs after it through its senses. In the process, it gains virtues and vices which in turn produce good and bad results. With the beginning of this vicious cycle of ignorance--desires--action--ignorance, a soul gets entangled more and more in the trappings of the world. To come out of this cycle, one has to acquire the Knowledge of the Supreme God. This requires purity of mind, which can be attained only through a thorough cleansing of the body, mind and social conduct. To preserve one's purity, a person must steer clear of every kind of contamination. The more a person is pure, the more important he is for the society, and the more he is advanced towards spiritual realisation. The guidelines of keeping oneself pure comes through dharma.

According to Manu, Dharma is to be known through the Vedas, Smritis, conduct of saints, and finally through one's own purified intellect. By following Dharma, one attains perfection. Manu goes into detail on the duties of a student, householder, hermit, monk and king. He also discusses the principles of political administration and the vows and observances to be followed as expiation for the commission of certain sins. From there he goes on to discuss spiritual matters, safety, personal habits, cleanliness, sanitation, ways of conduct, and subjects of common sense.

The great lawgiver accepts that there is hardly any activity that is not prompted by desire (kama), but to act solely on such urge is tamasik (demeaning). It is to curb these base tendencies that dharma was promulgated by the sages. Manu stresses the importance of dharma by saying that one is born alone, one dies alone, and one enjoys the fruits of one's deeds alone. Father, mother, wife, children and friends will not come to one's help in the other world; only Dharma will rescue him. He finally sums up his instructions on dharma by saying that of all dharma, attainment of knowledge of Self is supreme, since that is the only way to attain immortality.

The work of Manu is more than 2500 years old, and yet it approaches such levels of rationality and justice that one is left wonderstruck. His approach towards various issues has one fundamental rule: Quality is more important than quantity. Manu gives tremendous freedom and licenses to the educated and the cultured, but he also demands huge sacrifices from them. While giving privileges to the Brahmins, he repeatedly asserts that a Brahmin who is

not devoted to the Vedas and austerities, is not to be treated as a Brahmin, but as a Shudra. Such a fallen Brahmin's privileges etc. are to be at par with a Shudra only.

Manu accepts the existence of customs peculiar to place, class, and families. He advises the conquering king to safeguard and maintain the customs of the conquered people, and yet consolidate his own empire. In contrast, one may look at the various conquering barbarians and the kings, including Alexander, whose first act after victory was to destroy the local culture. Today's India, despite all its diversity, is an integrated country only because the Hindu kings of the past followed the political principles of Manu.

Creation according to Manu

God alone exists. He is eternal, sat (real, because He exists) and also asat (because He is unknowable and indiscernible by the mind and senses). In the beginning the Lord alone existed. He was indiscernible, so there was only divine darkness.

Desirous of Creation, the Lord first created the great elements (sattva, rajas, tamas). He now appeared knowable (by the Yogis), with supreme creative power. This dispelled the divine darkness. He then created the divine waters and placed his seed in them. The waters are called nārah. Since God first resided (ayana) there, He is called Narayana.

That seed became a golden egg (Hiranyagarbha), from which Brahma was born. He stayed meditating in that egg for a whole year (of Brahma), and then he broke it into two by his mere will. Out of those two halves, Brahma formed heaven and earth, and placed sky, oceans etc. in between.

He then created Mahat (cosmic mind) and Ahamkara (cosmic Ego). The rest of creation followed according to the Samkhya/Vedanta principle.

Brahma then created the gods, human beings, the great sages Sadhyas, and yajna --the eternal sacrifice. He then went on to create different kinds of actions and emotions. These followed the same pattern as it was in the previous cycle of creation.

Whatever qualities and emotions he assigned to different beings at the time of the first creation: good or bad, ferocity or gentleness, virtue or sin, truth or falsehood, that clung to them even afterwards to them.

To make the creation go faster, he divided his own body and became half male and half female. From the female he produced Virat. That Virat did tapasya from which Manu was born. Manu also did tapasya to create the first

ten Prajapati, who are: Marichi, Atri, Angira, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu, Pracheta, Vasistha, Bhrigu and Narada.

These Prajapatis created seven other Manus. They also created many other class of beings who had not yet been created.

Commanded by Manu, these great Prajapati also did a lot of tapasya and with the power acquired through that, they created both the immovable and the movable beings according to their karma over series of creation and dissolution.

So the goal of life for everyone is to follow the path of dharma, and get out of the cycle of life and death.

God

Manu accepts the knowledge of Brahman as the supreme goal of life. The concept of personal God, or Iswara, does not find any place in his outlook towards life, and concepts like God's will, surrender to God, predestination etc. are completely alien to his philosophy. Summing up the process of spiritual realisation he says:

"By the regular practice of the Vedas, constant internal and external purity, practice of austerity, and by not being inimical towards any being, one gets the memory of past lives. This makes one strive for the knowledge of Brahman. The knowledge of Brahman results in infinite joy for the person."
(Manu Smriti 4.148-9)

Women

Manu firmly believes that women have the power to sway the minds of menfolk, irrespective of any existing relationship. So, women needed to be treated with care and caution. License to women to move around wantonly was a dangerous thing for her, her family, and the society.

However, Manu is emphatic about the rights and privileges of women, and treats them with great respect. He also introduces the concept of stree dhan (the property of a wife) which cannot be touched by the husband. Special instructions are repeatedly given for the education of daughters, and the protection of sister, wife and mother.

When Swamiji was in America, a controversy was raging there regarding the rights and privileges of Hindu widows in India. There was a group called Ramabai circle who found fault with everything that India had to say or do about its widows. Unwittingly Swamiji was also sucked into it, but he refrained from making any direct response. Ultimately it was his friend Dr. Lewis G.

Janes's, who made a full reply to Mrs. James McKeen, leader of the Brooklyn Ramabai Circle. His reply appeared in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, part of which read:

"Not only that the wife inherits absolutely her husband's property and the use of his real estate during her lifetime, but that her own independent property, if she has offspring, goes to her children instead of to her husband. In case she has no offspring, another section makes her husband her heir; or, when the marriage is irregular, her mother and father inherit her estate instead of her husband.

"Still another section makes it the duty of the king to protect the inherited and other property "of wives and widows faithful to their lords" against all aggressors. "A righteous king must punish like thieves those relatives who appropriate the property of such females during their lifetime" (Manu, viii. 27, 28, 29). And against male relatives who would live on the separate property of females, this malediction is also hurled: "But those male relatives who, in their folly, live on the separate property of women, e.g., appropriate the beasts of burden, carriages and clothes of women, commit sin and will sink into hell" (Manu iii. 52). Thus, not only legal, but religious sanctions of the strongest kind protect the separate estates of Hindu women, be they single, wives or widows."

Shudras

Before one goes into the issues of Shudra as discussed by Manu, it must be remembered that the book was completed half a millennium before Jesus walked on this earth, and around quarter of a millennium before Julius Caesar considered it fit to call Britain and nearby countries barbarians.

In the time of Manu and earlier, Shudras were mostly the new entrants to Hinduism, who were yet to imbibe the high standards of Brahminical culture. They had not yet given up their basic tendencies of enjoyment and uncleanness -- two important virtues of an upper caste. These two vices resulted in other personality faults like cruelty, selfishness etc. All this meant that they had not yet become fit to climb the social hierarchy. Hence, they were given all kinds of licenses when it came to enjoying sense pleasure (including meat eating, wine drinking, onion and garlic eating etc.), but were prohibited from reading and listening to the Vedas. Here it may be mentioned that to the sages, the knowledge of the Vedas was something like a copyrighted thing, and so, that knowledge could be imparted only to the right person, on payment of proper fees (dakshina). In other matters, they were treated more or less quite fairly.

Manu mentions that a shudra can attain the highest heaven exactly like a Brahmin simply by practising the good conduct of the Brahmins, and

performing five great sacrifices (explained later). The sage also mentions how a child of a shudra woman can become a Brahmin over successive generations.

The Idea of Justice

Manu prescribes different treatment for different kind of persons. For example "The seniority of Brahmins is from (sacred) knowledge, that of Kshatriyas from valour, that of Vaisyas from wealth, about that of Shudras from age." (MS II.155).

"For a crime of theft, a Shudra should be penalised 8 times, the penalty should be 16 times if he is a Vaishya, 32 times if he is a Kshatriya and 64 times if he is a Brahmin. The punishment can be even 100 times or 128 times if he is a Brahmin. (MS VIII.337-338)"

"When the punishment for an ordinary citizen is 1 pana, the punishment for those in ruling class should be 1000 pana." (MS VIII.336).

On the other hand, Manu advises not to give the punishment of death to a Brahmin. Instead the convict's head should be shaved in public, which is equivalent to death punishment for him. (MS VIII. 379). After all, greater responsibility comes with greater understanding, and with it comes greater accountability. And, what is accountability without cost?

When most judicial systems of the world like British, French, American and Indian believe in "equality of all before justice", "uniform civil code" and all such great ideals, Was Manu then right in defining law in this partisan way?

Actually Manu particularises morality, instead of generalising it. It is unfortunate that we have come to associate punishment with suffering rather than penance and purification. When punishment is accepted with grace by the punished, it becomes penance for him. In turn, it takes him to the next level of spiritual evolution. This is the principle behind punishment and justice in Manu.

This may seem surprising, or even shocking to all those who have grown up with the popular feeds of the generalised approach to law and justice. 'All are same before the law' has become a truism even to a child, although it has no significance anywhere. When one looks closely at the two approaches of generalisation and particularisation of values, one is bound to feel surprised at the honesty and the insight of Manu, and the sheer dishonesty and hypocrisy of those who take a generalised approach.

Actually, morality, ethics and justice are always practised on the principle of tribe concern, which can also be termed as "in group" ethics, or "tribe ethics". Here tribe means the group to which one intrinsically belongs.

A monk, or a person living alone, away from any tribe, can indeed practise values without ever making any compromise. Mundaka Upanishad instructs spiritual aspirants to stick constantly to truth, tapas, right knowledge, and brahmacharya. But this is difficult for a person who belongs to a "tribe".

This is where Manu's genius comes into play.

At the time of Manu (c. 200 BCE), a large number of outsiders were entering the mainstream Hinduism. Then there were the jatis, which were the sub-sub castes of Hinduism. The whole country had literally lakhs of "tribe", each having its own code of conduct and moral principles. A fisherman would not cheat another fisherman, but would not mind cheating, say, a blacksmith.

Manu put a stop to all that, and, instead, crystallised them into four "tribes", known as the four Varna. The Varna system was already there, and so was the moral principles and the legal system. Manu simply took the entire thing together, juggled them and came up with his Smriti, that did away with the ghetto "tribe" mentality, and broadened the mental horizon of all by forcing people to follow one of the four sets of principles.

Not only that these four sets of morality and justice got rid of the lakhs of "tribe" practices, they also had most laws and principles in common with each other. That is how the idea of "India" was concretised by him.

This code of conduct is essentially a manual of unselfishness. Manu knew that not everyone can be equally unselfish, nor should one expect the same from all. So, there can neither be a uniform civil code, nor can there be same criminal laws for all. Not only that. Even the same person may not act on the same principles of morality on which he had been acting till yesterday.

Manu's greatness lies in his compassionate understanding of a man's weakness. From there stems his ideas of justice.

Yajnavalkya & Parasara Smriti

Next in importance to Manusmriti is Yajnavalkya Smriti. It has 1009 shlokas arranged systematically in three sections. The famous commentary Mitakshara by Vijnaneshwara is considered to be a standard work on this Smriti. Yajnavalkya Smriti is shorter and more liberal, particularly towards women, than Manusmriti. This maturity is also because it was written much later, probably in 5th A.D.

Compared to Yajnavalkya Smriti, Manusmriti is not a systematic treatise. For example, Manusmriti does not have a clear-cut division between religion and law, but being a later work, Yajnavalkya Smriti makes this distinction clear. Similarly, Manusmriti is more like a jumbled work in which the discussion jumps from issue to issue: it may have one shloka on religion, the next shloka on law, the third one on morality, and likewise. On the other hand, Yajnavalkya Smriti is very systematic. The demarcation between legal issues and religious issues by the sage Yajnavalkya is considered by many legal experts to be a great advance over Manusmriti.

Parasara Smriti is noted for its advanced and modernistic views. It deals only with acara and Prayascitta. It also discusses the Apad-dharma (the code during emergency) of the four castes. Madhavacharya wrote a commentary on this work.

Survey of Samskaras -- The Hindu sacraments

The samskaras cover the entire gamut of a Hindu's life: from the moment he is conceived in the mother's womb, till his death. While commenting on the emphasis laid on samskaras by the Hindus, Max Muller wrote that this discloses "the deep-rooted tendency in the heart of man to bring the chief events of human life into contact with a higher power, and to give to our joys and sufferings a deeper significance and a religious sanctification."

The Hindu sages realised that an artful life requires constant care, culture and refinement, without which one would degenerate and become a savage. The transformation of the wild into the cultured is possible only through taming and training which has been prescribed beautifully by the samskaras (sacraments) over thousands of years. All the samskaras and allied ceremonies are based on the philosophy that life is a progressive cycle through a series of incidents centring around the desire to live, to enjoy, to think, and to retire. It is with this idea that the rituals and sacrifices evolved which were meant to sanctify one's life physically, emotionally, psychically and spiritually.

There are several objectives of samskaras:

- * To receive the blessings of the gods, and to stay protected from the evil powers that beset human life at various stages.
- * By making the gods happy through samskara, a practitioner hopes to obtain material gains. During some ceremonies prayers are offered to gods for health, wealth, children, intellect etc.
- * Performance of some sacraments is used to enhance one's social status and also to get additional privileges. For example, a boy who goes through the sacred thread ceremony, acquires the right to study the Vedas, and also becomes important in the eyes of his peers.

* The samskaras also help in attaining cultural gains. Similarly, some impurity is inherently attached to the pre-natal stage of birth which gets removed through the proper rites.

* Sage Angiras says, "Just as a picture is painted with various colours, so the character of the individual is formed by the proper performance of the samskaras." Gautama says that samskaras, along with certain other noble qualities, take one to Brahman.

* Samskaras are designed to channel the energies of a man towards the creation of a life for him which would be soothing, enjoyable, spiritual, practical, and dignified. It is only thus that both the individual and the society can live in peace and harmony.

History and Sources of Samskaras

The earliest suggestion of samskaras are found in the Rig Veda. Some hymns used during marriage, conception and funeral are from this sacred book. In the Yajur Veda there are references to the tonsure ceremony, which was common to Shrouta or Yāga ceremonies. The Atharva Veda is a rich source of mantras relating to several of the samskaras like marriage, funeral, initiation for Vedic studies etc.

Gopatha Brahmana contains references to Upanayana (sacred thread ceremony). The word Brahmacharya is found in Sathapatha Brahman. Taittiriya Aranyaka contains Mantras for cremation, and Chandogya Upanishad relates how a brahmacharin (novice) is admitted to the gurukula (seminary).

Mention of Gayatri Mantra is made in Brihadaranyaka and other Upanishads. Taittiriya Upanishad contains the famous convocation address by the teacher to his students at the time of their graduation. This Upanishad also has mantras for begetting a learned son, and mantras to be used during funeral ceremonies.

Sodasa Samskara: The Sixteen Sacraments

There are sixteen samskaras that range from conception to funeral ceremonies.

1. Garbhādhāna: The propitious day and time are fixed astrologically for garbhadhana (conception), and the ritual follows a set pattern. The mantras uttered in this samskara are essentially prayers offered to God to help the bride conceive a good son.

2. Punsavanam: This ceremony is performed in the second, third and the fourth month of pregnancy. The meaning and object of this ceremony is to quicken a male child in the woman.

3. Simantonnayana: This is performed during the period between the fifth and the eighth months of pregnancy. Its implications are that the pregnancy be fruitful, the child be endowed with sharp and penetrating intellect, and the child be beautiful like the full-moon.

4. Jātakarma: This ceremony is performed before the umbilical cord of the child is severed. During the ceremony, the father looks at the face of the newly born infant, which at once redeems his debt to his ancestors. A name is also given to the child, in secret, lest his enemies should practice black magic on the child with that name.

5. Nāmakarana: The naming ceremony is performed normally on the tenth or twelfth day after birth. This is a simple ceremony in which the child is given a name. According to Asvalayana (a great lawgiver), the names of boys should have an even number of syllables. A two-syllable name will bring material prosperity and fame, and a four syllable name will bring religious fame. The practice of naming children after favourite deities began from the Puranic times. The rise of the Bhakti movement made this practice popular. By naming one's child after gods, one gets the opportunity of uttering God's name whenever the child's name is called out.

6. Niskramana: The infant is taken out of the house into the climate of fresh air and sunshine for the first time.

7. Annaprāshana: This is the ceremony for the first feeding of cooked rice to the newborn. The object of this ceremony is to pray to gods with Vedic Mantras to bless the child with good digestive powers, good thoughts and talents. It is performed when the child is six months old, which is the right weaning time for a child.

8. Chudākarma: This ceremony of the first tonsure is to be performed in the third year of the male child. It also initiates the maintenance of a 'Sikha' (tuft of hair on the head) as a religious necessity after that age.

9. Karnavedha: The piercing of the child's ear should be done in the third or the fifth year from the date of birth.

10. Upanayana and Vedārambha: The thread ceremony is performed for the male child in the eighth year for Brahmins, eleventh year for Kshatriya, and twelfth year for Vaishya. This ceremony gives the child a second birth (Dwija), as it were, where the Guru (teacher) becomes his father and Gayatri (the great Vedic mantra) becomes his mother. The investiture with the sacred thread entitles the child to study the Vedas and participate in Vedic functions. In essence, the child commences his journey on the road to spiritual life only after this ceremony.

Instructions in the Vedas, known as Vedāmbha, begin after this ceremony. The father of the would-be student imparts general information regarding the life of a Brahmacharin (celibate student) and preaches the code of conduct, which are a pointer to the rigours of discipline that a brahmachari was subjected to.

11. Samavartana: Upon completion of studies, the teacher used to hold a graduating ceremony in which instructions were given on how to lead the rest of life. "Speak the truth. Practise Dharma. Do not neglect the study of the Vedas. Having brought to the teacher the gift desired by him, (enter the householder's life and see that) the line of progeny is not cut off. Do not swerve from the truth. Do not swerve from Dharma. Do not neglect (personal) welfare. Do not neglect prosperity (refers to righteous actions by which wealth is earned). Do not neglect the study and teaching of Vedas."

12. Vivāha: Marriage

13. Grihasthāshrama: Entering the life of a householder

14. Vānaprastha: A person was expected to give up his worldly responsibilities and privileges, and go to the forest to lead a simple and solitary life.

15. Sannyāsa: This is the last stage of a person's life, in which he renounces everything and devotes himself exclusively to the contemplation of Brahman.

16. Antyeshti: The last rites of the dead body are called the Antyeshti Samskara. There is no other Samskara thereafter for this body. This Samskara is also called by the names of Nāmedha, Purushmedha etc.

Duties of a householder

The periods of life as a student and householder are full with special injunctions on the performance of ceremonies of different kinds. The prayer called Sandhyavandana, to be performed thrice daily, is obligatory on both the student and the householder. Daily worship of one's chosen deity is an additional duty of the householder.

A very important part of the daily functions of the householder consists of a set of fivefold duties called Pancha-Mahayajnas (five great sacrifices). The first of these is Brahma-Yajna or the sacrifice dedicated to the Vedas and their seers (Rishis) in the form of regular study (Svādhyaya) of the scriptures and the teaching of it to deserving students (Adhyāpana). The second is Deva-Yajna or the sacrifice offered to the celestial in the form of oblations poured into the sacred fire. The third is Pitri-Yajna or libations, etc. offered to

the ancestors. The fourth is Manushya-Yajna or the feeding of guests (atithi). The fifth is Bhuta-Yajna or the feeding of animals, especially cows and birds. These five functions are imperatives on every householder and are regarded as great sacrifices (MahāYajnas).

The ceremonies in the names of the dead have also great details, commencing with the rite of cremation and ending in the rites connected with the exaltation of the departed soul to the state of divine attainment.

Conclusion

While explaining the role of the Smritis, Swami Vivekananda said, "The ideal at one end is the Brahmin and the ideal at the other end is the Chandala, and the whole work is to raise the Chandala up to the Brahmin. Slowly and slowly you find more and more privileges granted to them {by the Smritis}. ... Then gradually we find in other Smritis, especially in those that have full power now, that if the Shudras imitate the manner and customs of the Brahmins they do well, they ought to be encouraged. Thus it is going on. (CW, vol 3 - 295)"

Going through the succession of the Smritis, one can see that the lawgivers were conscious of the struggle for the upward mobility of the downtrodden through education and achievement. Whenever this mobility became irrepressible, the lawgivers made it legally and morally acceptable to all. It was thus that the yesterday's untouchable became a fit candidate for the knowledge of Brahman, the highest goal of human life.

In recent times Manu Smriti is blamed for creating caste based differences and also for being unfair towards lower castes and women. But most of these critics hardly read him, and those who read him, forget that Manu was just the chronicler and codifier of what existed in the society much earlier than Jesus Christ walked on this earth. Also, considering the fundamental thrust on purity, quality and stability by the Smriti writers, Manu was quite considerate towards all. Quoting Manu out of context, and out of time frame has been an unfair practice by his critics. Rather, Manu should be credited for creating an environment of spiritual growth for all, despite the steel frame of the social order.

Hindus have always been a socially conscious race since prehistoric times. That is how they have survived the tempests of time, attacks of the marauding tribes, temptations of materialism, and a sheer desire for revolution out of boredom. The little defect that the society has today is because proper adjustments were not made during the last thousand years or so. That is why Swami Vivekananda wanted a new Smriti to be written for the present age.

Tantra: Popularising Mother Worship

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Hindu race has come to perceive God both as Impersonal and Personal.

More importantly, they believe that in His Personal aspect God can manifest His Power in any form. The manifestation of God's Power, including the Creation of universe, is never an act, as the term is commonly used, rather it is effected by His mere will, since God's will and its actualisation are same. God being pure consciousness, He is the repository of all strength, and hence He does not have to act through mind, senses, organs, and objects to materialise His will the way we have to do.

What might then happen if the Lord ever thinks of Himself as feminine? God being beyond the cause-effect phenomena, only a naive can define God as being mere this or that. God being Infinite and pure Consciousness, He can have a particular form, and also many other forms simultaneously, along with being formless. That is the true meaning of being Infinite. If He thinks of Himself as Boar or Fish, who can stop Him from manifesting in those forms, since His thinking and act are same.

There being no second -- superior or inferior -- to Him, He may very well think of Himself (rather Itself) as feminine too. After all, gender is a dividing characteristic of dualistic existence which can never apply to God. Tantra and Shakti worship are rooted in this concept of seeing the Divine as feminine.

Philosophy of Mother Worship

The idea of Mother worship comes from the Vedas, and was later elaborated in the Puranas. But the real growth of Mother Worship in India came from the Tantra traditions that influenced even the Puranas. In the present day Hinduism, Mother Worship mostly comes from the Puranic traditions, but their roots, and the mantras used in them have clear foot prints of Tantra.

Independent of the Puranic traditions, Tantras produced great sages who popularised it in certain sections of the society, but due to many reasons, Tantra practices could not be accepted, appreciated and absorbed in the mainstream Hinduism.

One chief reason for it was that unlike the Vedic systems, Tantras are highly esoteric, meaning that their practices are secret, and also that their texts have

layered meaning, and hence these cannot be understood unless a teacher trained in Tantra traditions explains them.

This kind of closed system is always dangerous for the practitioners and the onlookers alike. Be it a secretive person, a secret society, or a secret branch of knowledge – these can never be relied upon fully. The same happened with the Tantras – its esoteric nature made spiritually cultured wary of it, and so it thrived mostly in the darkness of secrecy without the benefits of corrective adjustments that comes to an open system. However, the contribution of Tantras to Mother worship cannot be undermined.

Here it is important to remember that religions, religious systems and their outlooks are never a thought out system the way most philosophies are. Religions are the externals around the spiritual truths concerning God – the way He is, and the way He is perceived by the great sages in the depths of their meditation. A thought out religion like Akbar's Din e-Ilahi, or humanism are put to the bins of history faster than it took them to be gestated, and the truths represented by them are as replaceable as a man's clothes. But it is not so with religions that have withstood the test of time. The applications of the truths represented by them may be skewed, and the rationale to explain them may be flawed, but the spiritual truths that they represent cannot be questioned.

The principle behind Shakti/Mother worship is that God Creates the universe through His power which is non-different from Him, the way fire and its burning power are one and the same. This power of God is known as Shakti, which is non-different from God, and hence worshipping It is same as worshipping God.

Philosophically speaking, when God is in non-creative mode, He alone exists. At that time His Shakti stays merged in Him. But when He wills to manifest His Power, It appears as Creation. How and why God wills so, is a divine mystery that no religion can ever answer satisfactorily, since the dividing line of Mind-Time-Space separates the Absolute from the Relative.

This dividing line is called variously by different schools of philosophy. The Vedantins call it Maya, devotees call it Divine Play, while Shakti worshippers call it Shakti. The branching out of different philosophies in Hinduism is mostly due to their difference in perception of this dividing line between the Absolute and the Relative.

Creation by God is effected through Shakti. The difference between any two beings lies in the manifestation of Shakti in them, and even incarnations of God belong to the realm of Shakti, since their divine play is carried out in this world – the area of Shakti. Mahanirvan Tantra, an important work on Tantra

describes Shakti as, “Thou art the supreme Power of Brahman, and from Thee has sprung the whole Universe. You are its Mother. Whatever there is in this world, with or without motion, owes its origin to Thee, and is dependent on Thee. Thou art the Origin of all the manifestations; Thou art the birthplace of even Us (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva). Thou knowest the whole world, yet none know Thee.” (Mahanirvan Tantra 4.10-12)

This gives a fair idea about what Shakti worship is about. Of these Shakti worshippers, most prefer to address It as Mother due to the love and sweetness associated with one’s mother that can be felt at the cosmic level too.

What are Tantras?

The word 'tantra' in Sanskrit is from a root that may mean 'to spread', 'origination', and 'knowledge'. Thus 'Tantra' means 'the scripture by which knowledge is spread'. Some scholars also think that the word may have come by the combination of the words 'tattva' (the science of the cosmic principles of Samkhya) and 'mantra' (the science of the mystic sound), which implies that Tantra is the application of these two sciences to attain spiritual enlightenment.

According to the tradition, Tantra is believed to have been taught by the great Lord Shiva to his divine consort, the Shakti. The Lord begins by expounding the Vedanta, goes through the principles of Samkhya, and ends with Shiva Tantra.

The Tantras, in general, admit the validity of the rituals of the Vedas, the discrimination and renunciation of the Upanishads, the purifying disciplines of Raja-Yoga, and the passionate love for the Deity described in the Puranas. They exhort the sadhakas to exercise will and self-effort, practise self-surrender, and supplicate for divine grace. Tantras promise their followers not only enjoyment of worldly happiness but also liberation (bhoga and apavarga). The system acknowledges that the power of the Kundalini can be aroused by the sincere pursuit of any spiritual discipline, and that this arousal can bring infinite achievement in any individual.

In its specific meaning, Tantra is a system that makes use of ritual, energy work, the use of the gross to access the spiritual, and the identification of the micro with the macro. The Tantric practitioner seeks to use the divine power that flows through the universe (including his own body) to attain purposeful goals, both spiritual and material. It is a kind of experimental science in which realisation promised by it is an experimentally verifiable fact.

The great advantage of Tantra over other religious system was that it promised both enjoyment of life (bhoga), as well as spiritual upliftment (yoga) by doing the same kind of sadhana. An aspirant who wishes to get worldly success and enjoyment had only to make the necessary sankalpa (resolve), whereas the aspirant for mukti also could achieve his desired goal by just making the proper resolve.

This helped the common man embrace Tantra more and more. After all, a man wants to save both the worlds simultaneously.

The origin and growth of Tantras

Tantras grew independent of the Vedic traditions, and may even be earlier to it in its origin. Many estimate that the system must have started crystallising by the 5th century B.C. The real rise of Tantra came with the rise of Shaivism and the Pancharatra, while its necessary framework was supplied by the Samkhya philosophy. Both these religious systems and philosophy are quite old, which means that the seeds of Tantra were sown quite early in the evolution of the Hindu system of thought.

By the tenth century, Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jaina sects of Tantra got mixed up. This gave rise to a particular mystic form which was very near to Saktism in essence. This also gave birth to new forms of esoteric religions.

In its wider sense, Tantra is not a single coherent system like the Vedas, or any other Hindu philosophy. It is an accumulation of practices and ideas of the Hindus since prehistoric times till the present age. Its birth is rooted in the Vedas; its development proceeds through the Upanishads, Itihasa, Puranas and Smritis. It also drew from different practices current in India like Shaivism, and its philosophy came mostly from Samkhya (to be discussed in the section on Philosophy).

Later, some schools of Buddhism amalgamated their philosophy with Tantra to develop Vajrayana school of Buddhism. This school became popular in Tibet and later it entered India in its new avatar. The present day Tantra is thus a mix of Hindu and Buddhism traditions of Tantra rituals.

The later Tantric texts like Mahanirvan Tantra wanted to connect their doctrines with the Vedas but the orthodox Vedic tradition did not allow the proximity, even though both systems have much in common. But the Vedic traditions being all powerful in Hindu religion, Tantras had to remain satisfied with being on the sidelines even though it contributed significantly in its rites, rituals and modes of worship.

In spite of the slight faced by the Vedic tradition, Tantra grew partly due to the failure of the Vedic system in the changed times, and partly because it offered quick fix solutions to the need and greed of common man.

The requirements for Vedic rituals had become impractical -- the ingredients used in Vedic sacrifices were too difficult to obtain, the life-style prescribed for a practitioner became nearly impossible to follow, and the promised results of heavens after death seemed too distant. On the other hand, the Upanishadic meditations were too difficult for a common man to follow, and the Puranas appeared as tales of fantasy. But the devout needed something concrete, something simpler, and something glamorous for them to acquire worldly good, and to destroy their ill wishers. The answer was Tantra.

The vitality and elasticity thus acquired made Tantra enter every house and temple of India. As if this was not enough, it made powerful inroads in every country where an Indian, or an Indian thought went. What passes off today as practices of Hinduism in India and the West, is essentially Tantra, packaged to suit the need of a particular community or an individual.

Tantra and the Vedas

Going strictly by the definitions, Tantra is neither shruti, nor smriti. The followers of Tantra treat it as an integral part of the Vedas (Agama), though there are not many takers for this. Historically speaking, the Tantric tradition may be considered as either parallel to, or intertwined with the Vedic tradition. The later Tantric writers wanted to base their doctrines on the Vedas but the orthodox followers of the Vedic tradition referred to Tantra in a spirit of denunciation, stressing its anti-Vedic character.

The Tantras essentially teach what the Vedas also teach. The difference lies in the method and certain subtle points of philosophy. In the various works of Tantras, one repeatedly comes across passages where the supremacy of the Vedas is accepted, with the caveat that the present age is for the Tantras.

There are some great similarities between the two systems, of which only some are being mentioned:

- * Both systems preach common goals of life.
- * The Vedas concerned with the victory of man over the forces of nature. In the Tantric sadhana also the chief concern is the ascendancy of man over nature, both external and internal.
- * Both these systems are highly ritualistic.
- * The offering of Soma rasa was replaced by wine in the Tantras
- * Both systems have various gods who are too willing to receive offerings and oblations.
- * The animal sacrifice of the Vedas became an essential ritual in the Tantra.

Tantra and the Smritis

The Tantras look down upon the Smriti literature as inferior to itself. However, they draw heavily from the Smritis, with necessary additions and alterations.

Some interesting developments in Tantras as compared to the Smritis are:

- * Tantras accept the Varna-Ashrama dharma, but add a fifth caste, called samanya. On the other hand it reduces the four ashramas to only two -- Grihastha and Sannyasa.
- * With Brahmacharya and Vanaprastha removed from the system, the sixteen samskaras, prescribed in the Smritis are reduced to ten.
- * The purificatory rites are reduced drastically.
- * The status of the Shudras go up considerably.
- * The practice of Sati got expressly prohibited.
- * Penances (prayascitta) for various mistakes became much simple.
- * Punishment for offences committed by a common man was made lighter.

The texts and the type of Tantras

The major sources of Tantras are the Agama, Yaamala, and the Buddhistic tradition. In the old books, there are mention of teachers like Dadhichi, Lakulisa, Kacha and others which show that this tradition is quite old and respected.

Geographically, there are four classes of Tantra: Kerala, Kashmira, Gauda, and Vilas, but their influence is not really confined to one region. With time they spread all over the country and got intertwined with each other.

Agamas

The Tantras are normally called both agama and nigama. In the agamas, Lord Shiva instructs Parvati, whereas in the nigamas, Parvati instructs Lord Shiva in the art of the Tantras. However, agama is the common term used for both of these.

The Agamas are theological treatises and practical manuals of the Tantras. The Agamas include the Tantras, Mantras and Yantras and also discuss Jnana, Yoga, Kriya or Ritual, and Charya or Worship. They also discuss metaphysics, cosmology, liberation, devotion, meditation, philosophy of Mantras, mystic diagrams, charms and spells, temple-building, image-making, domestic observances, social rules, public festivals etc.

The Agamas are divided into three sections: The Vaishnava, The Saiva and The Sakta.

The Vaishnava Tantras are of four kinds: The Vaikhanasa, Pancharatra, Pratishthasara, Vijnana-lalita. In this group there are 75 Tantras, 205 Upatantras, 20 kalpas, 1 Yamala etc.

The Saiva Tantras recognise 32 Tantras of which the chief is Kamika. In addition they have 325 Upatantras, 10 Samhitas, 2 Yamalas etc. These Agamas are also the basis of Kashmir Saivism which is called the Pratyabhijna system. The latter works of Pratyabhijna system show a distinct leaning to Advaitism (non-dualistic philosophy). The Southern Saivism, i.e., Saiva Siddhanta, and the Kashmir Saivism, regard these Agamas as their authority, besides the Vedas. Each Agama has Upa-Agamas (subsidiary Agamas). Of these, only fragmentary texts of twenty are available. Lord Siva is the central God in the Saiva Agamas.

The Sakta Agamas glorify Sakti as the World-Mother. They dwell on the Sakti (energy) aspect of God and prescribe numerous courses of ritualistic worship of the Divine Mother in various forms. There are seventy-seven Agamas. These are very much like the Puranas in some respects. The texts are usually in the form of dialogues between Siva and Parvati. In some of these, Siva answers the questions put by Parvati, while in others, Parvati answers and Siva questions.

The other Tantras are:

Saura Tantra with 30 Tantras, 96 Upatantras, 2 Yamalas etc.

Ganpatya Tantras have 50 Tantras, 25 Upatantras, , 8 pancharatras etc.

Bauddha Tantras which have a very large number of literature.

Mahanirvana, Kularnava, Kulasara, Prapanchasara, Tantraraja, Rudra-Yamala, Brahma-Yamala, Vishnu-Yamala and Todala Tantra are some of the important works. Among the existing books on the Agamas, the most famous are the Isvara-Samhita, Ahirbudhnya-Samhita, Sanatkumara-Samhita, Narada-Pancharatra, Spanda-Pradipika and the Mahanirvana-Tantra.

Yaamala

Another class of literature are known as Yaamala. These are eight in number and have the tradition of Bhairava, instead of the Lord Shiva. The most famous work of this group is Brahma Yamala.

Yamalas indicate a great development in the Tantric sadhana. These give a well-developed mode of worship, harmonise a lot of local deities and cults, make provision for sadhana by people of other castes also, and introduce a great variety of gods and goddesses. The major shift in these works, as compared to the Agama literature is the worship of Shakti instead of Lord Shiva.

These works preserve the orthodox tradition of the earlier period and also present themselves as heterodox.

Buddhist Tantras

These are the later group of literature which developed around 7th century A.D. Buddhist mysticism had assumed three different forms -- Vajrayana, Sahajayana and Kalachakrayana. The philosophical basis for these works was supplied by the Yogachara and the Madhyamika systems of philosophy. Vajrayana emphasises the importance of mantra, mudra, and mandala; Sahajayana discards all formalism; and Kalachakrayana attaches importance to muhurta, tithi, nakshatra etc., thus bringing the elements of astrology and astronomy in sadhana.

The Tantric Traditions

There are also Kaula tradition, started by Matsyendranath, in which the Sahaja tradition of the Buddhists finds a lot of importance.

The Natha tradition originated from the teachings of Siddhacharya, and was continued by the great teachers like Gorakshanatha.

The Vaishnava Sahajiya was established in Bengal before Chaitanyadeva. In this sect Radha is the Shakti, and Krishna is the Supreme Reality.

Avadhuta tradition has its roots in Natha sect, whereas Bauls of Bengal are inspired by the Vaishnava Sahajiya.

The Various Paths

The Tantra tradition gives a list of its various paths as: Vedachara, Vaishnavachara, Shaivachara, Dakshinachara, Vamachara, Siddhantachara, and Kaulachara. These are classified as tamasik, rajasik, and Sattvic. The first three are for pashubhava people (explained below); Vamachara and Siddhantachara are for veerabhava practitioners; Dakshinachara is for pashubhava sadhaka who are struggling to reach veerabhava, and Kaulachara is for divyabhava aspirantas.

According to the Tantras, the first three cannot be practised because of the strict injunctions in them, and of the difficulties imposed by the Varnashrama dharma. For example, it is said that a brahmin engaged in a sacrifice must not look at the face of a shudra. But this is quite impossible in the prevailing social conditions. This leaves us with the remaining four. Of these, Vamachara and dakshinachara are more popular as Tantras.

The ignorance of the general public and the abuse by the irresponsible practitioners of Vamachara or 'left-hand' path, has made the whole science of Tantra suspect. The ritual of this path is based upon the principle of the 'return current', which seeks to reverse the process that creates the bonds of the animal man. The five ingredients used by followers of this path are the 'pancha makara' - mansa, matsya, madya, mudra, maithuna -- meat, fish, wine, fried cereals and union. These, however, have different connotations for different classes of aspirants. The underlying principle of Vamachara is to emphasize the fact that a man makes progress in spiritual life not by falsely shunning that which makes him fall, but by seizing upon it and sublimating it so as to make it a means of liberation.

It is only for a certain type of aspirant, called veera (heroic), that the actual drinking of wine and practice of union are prescribed. The teacher of such a practitioner carefully points out that the joy and stimulation arising from these are to be utilised for the uplift of the mind from the physical plane. Tantra never countenances excess or irregularity for the purpose of the gratification of carnal desire. To break chastity, it says, is to lose or shorten life. Woman, associated with the Tantric practices in order to help man in his path of renunciation, is an object of veneration to all schools of Tantra. She is regarded as the embodiment of Sakti, or the power that projects and pervades the universe. To insult a woman is a grievous sin.

Same is true of meat-eating and wine drinking. The Tantras specifically prohibit people from indulging in these things excepting when offered to the Lord.

Mahanirvan Tantra explains the five "M" as being representative of the five great elements of Nature. According to this book, wine represents fire element, fish represents water element, meat represents air element, fried grains represent earth element, and union is the representative of the ether (akasa) element. By offering these to the Mother of the universe, one actually worships her through her creative elements.

Animal, Heroic and Divine

Tantra divides sadhakas, or spiritual aspirants, into three groups according to their mental disposition: pashu, veera, and divya -- animal, heroic, and divine. The man with animal disposition (pashu) moves along the outgoing current and earns merit and demerit from his worldly activities. He has not yet raised himself above the common round of convention, nor has he cut the three knots of 'hate, fear and shame.' Swayed by his passions, he is a slave of emotions: lust, greed, pride, anger, delusion, and envy. Such a sadhaka is not allowed even to touch the five ingredients of the left-hand ritual. The competent aspirant for the hazardous ritual with the five ingredients is

called a hero (veera). He has the inner strength to 'play with fire' and to burn his worldly bonds with it. Established in complete self-control, he does not forget himself even in the most trying and tempting circumstances. He is a man of fearless disposition, inspiring terror in those who cherish animal propensities. Pure in motive, gentle in speech, strong in body, resourceful, courageous, intelligent, adventurous, and humble, he cherishes only what is good.

The sadhaka of divine (divya) disposition is one who has risen above all the bonds of desire and has nothing to sublimate. Mahanirvana Tantra describes such an aspirant as sparing in speech, beloved of all, introspective, steady, sagacious, and solicitous about others' welfare. He is always in ecstasy, enjoying 'inner woman and wine.' For the five ingredients used by a hero he substitutes consciousness (chit), bliss (ananda), and exaltation (bhava).

A Word on animal sacrifice

To many, the animal sacrifice, associated with the worship of Mother Kali and other such deities, is repulsive. While talking to Romain Rolland, Rabindranath Tagore also expressed his revulsion towards the worship of Kali for this reason. Even Swami Vivekananda says, "How I used to hate Kali! And all Her ways! That was the ground of my six years' fight--that I would not accept Her. But I had to accept Her at last! ... Sex-love and creation! These are at the root of most religions. And these in India are called Vaishnavism, and in the West Christianity. How few have dared to worship Death or Kali! Let us worship Death! Let us embrace the Terrible, because it is terrible, not asking that it be toned down. Let us take misery for misery's own sake!"

However, the sacrifices in Tantra are not mere killings the way a butcher or an abattoir kills animals for meat. In this system, it is presumed that a common man cannot rise above his desires, which includes meat eating. If a person has to do so, it is better that he takes meat as prasada. It is for this reason that animals are sacrificed. But before that pashu Gayatri is recited in the ears of the sacrificial goat, with the idea that the relevant mantra will release the animal from his species, and he will be born in some higher species to move towards the goal of evolution, which is self realisation. In Tantra, no female animal is ever sacrificed.

The Essential Philosophy

Reality, according to Tantra, is Satchidananda -- Existence, Knowledge, Bliss. Satchidananda becomes restricted through Maya, and its transcendental nature is then expressed in terms of forms and categories, as explained in Samkhya and other systems of Hindu philosophy.

According to the Vedanta philosophy, Maya functions only on the relative plane at the time of creation, preservation and destruction. Neither is the creation ultimately real, nor are the created beings real. True knowledge reveals only an undifferentiated consciousness. According to Tantra, however, Satchidananda is called Siva-Shakti, the hyphenated word suggesting that Siva or the Absolute, and Sakti, or its creative power, are eternally conjoined like a word and its meaning; and that the one cannot be thought of without the other. According to Tantra, a conception of pure consciousness which denies Shakti is only half of the truth. Satchidananda is essentially endowed with the power of self-evolution and self-involution. Therefore perfect spiritual knowledge is the knowledge of the whole: Of consciousness as being and consciousness as power to become.

In Tantra, it is only in the relative world that Siva and Sakti are thought of as separate entities. It also affirms that both the world process (Sristi) and the jiva are real and not merely illusory superimpositions upon Brahman. In declaring that the jiva finally becomes one with the Reality, Tantra differs from Visista Advaita.

According to Tantra, the non-dual reality becomes evolved, which is real and not merely apparent as in Vedanta. This evolution gives certain kind of powers and also restricts every form of existence (starting from a stone to human beings). This accounts for a being's actions and reactions. These determinants are the 'fetters' (pasa) which weave the whole fabric of the jiva's phenomenal life. It is by them that one gets bound and behaves like an animal, (pasu).

The goal of Tantra is to teach the method by which these bondages (pasa) can be cut asunder to make every Jiva one with Shiva.

Mahanirvan Tantra emphasises the importance of kulachara (Tantra) for liberation in the present age. The kula (lit. total) are: Jiva, Prakriti, space, time, and the five great elements (akasha, air, fire, water, earth). The realisation that these nine are one with Brahman is Kulachara. This knowledge produces Dharma, artha, kama and moksha.

Tantra as a mode of sadhana

The Tantric sadhana is the method of transference of one's baser nature to the spiritual. In the Vedantic sadhana one has to negate all limiting adjuncts on the self accepting them as unreal until one realises Brahman. In order to reach the affirmation of oneness, one has to renounce the world of names and forms. On the other hand, Tantra prescribes the discipline of sublimation which consists of three phases: purification, elevation and the realisation. These require practices that can be classified as:

Ordinary Rituals

The ordinary ritual or puja may include any of the following elements:

- a. Mantra and yantra: These play an important part in Tantra for invoking specific deities such as Shiva or Mother Kali.
- b. Identification with deities: Tantra embraces every Hindu god and goddess. Thus each god in Tantra represents an aspect of the ultimate Para Shiva, or Brahman. These deities may be worshipped externally with flowers, incense, and other offerings; but, more importantly, are engaged as attributes of Ishta Devata. The practitioners either visualise the deities present within themselves, or try to feel their presence outside.

The Secret Rituals

The secret ritual (panchatattva, chakrapuja, and panchamakara) may include any or all of the elements of the ordinary ritual along with the elements of one of these three. These practices are conducted only in the presence of the initiated devotees.

Some important concepts used in Tantra sadhana are:

Purification: The evolution and involution go hand in hand. The power that created the world, and the bondages that are associated with it can be turned back to take the individual away from the world to liberation. The Tantra believes in the saying, 'One must rise by that by which one falls'; 'the very poison that kills becomes the elixir of life when used by the wise.' The only question is how to transform the cardinal impulses for material enjoyment (bhoga) into spiritual experiences (Yoga)? If this can somehow be done, then jiva will undoubtedly become one with Shiva, the individual will definitely become pure.

Tantras admit the presence of a perennial conflict between the flesh and the spirit. The observance of moral and social conventions, however desirable on the plane of worldly existence, does not make a man different from an animal. But, when one realises that the whole process of creation, preservation, and destruction is but the manifestation of the lila, or sportive pleasure, of Siva-Sakti, one does not see anything carnal or gross in the universe. The special technique of the Tantric discipline is to transform the disintegrating force into the integrating one.

Every action, whether yielding pleasure or pain, fasten the chain upon the jiva with additional links. The hope of liberty lies in uncoiling the coil of nature that has closed upon it. This is called the 'awakening' of the Kundalini by which one moves from the plane of impure principles to that of pure principles.

Kundalini

The spiritual awakening of a sadhaka is described in Tantra by means of the Kundalini power. Properly understood, Kundalini is not something peculiar to Tantra, but the basis of the spiritual experiences described by all religious faiths. Every genuine spiritual experience, such as the seeing of light or a vision, or communion with the Deity, is only a manifestation of the ascent of the Kundalini.

In our common language, Kundalini can be equated with the infinite potential energy in every being, which releases only a very small amount of working energy for one's daily life. The coiled-up Kundalini is the central pivot upon which the whole complex apparatus of the body and mind moves and turns. Once the Kundalini is aroused, the whole of potential gets converted into the dynamic, like the release of energy during an atomic explosion.

The aim of waking the Kundalini is not the acquisition of greater power for the purpose of performing miraculous feats or the enjoyment of material pleasures; it is the realisation of Satchidananda.

Chakras

The passage of the awakened Kundalini lies through the Sushumna, which is the normally closed central nerve in the nervous system. A kind of hollow canal, the Sushumna passes through the spinal column connecting the base centre (muladhara) at the bottom of the spine with the centre at the cerebrum.

Tantra speaks of six centres (Chakras) through which Sushumna passes which look like different-coloured lotuses with varying numbers of petals. In the ordinary worldly person these centres (Chakras) are closed, and the lotuses droop down like buds. As the Kundalini rises through the Sushumna Canal and touches the centres, these buds turn upward as fully opened flowers and the aspirant obtains spiritual experiences.

Mantras

Mantras play an important part in the Tantric discipline. The word 'mantra' means, literally, 'that which, when reflected upon, gives liberation.' The Mantra is the sound equivalent of the Deity, that is to say, chit or Consciousness, whereas the external image is the material form of the Mantra. The sound-vibration is the first manifestation of chit and nearest to it. It is really intermediate between pure consciousness and the physical object, being neither absolutely immaterial like the former nor dense like the latter.

Tantra regards vibration as a manifestation of the cosmic energy, or Sakti, and teaches that as such it can lead to the realisation of chit, which otherwise eludes the grasp of even an intelligent person. Thus Mantras are not mere words, but are forms of concentrated thought of exceeding potency. The advanced aspirant finds that a Mantra and the deity with which it is associated are identical. The deity being the illumination embodied in the Mantra.

The mantras are also classified as masculine, feminine and neuter. Masculine mantras end in hum and phat; feminine mantras end in swaha, and neuter mantras end in namah.

Beeja

Beeja (lit. seed) plays a very important role in the Tantras. Just like Aum of the Vedas, these beeja are mystic sounds produced by the combination of various sounds. There are innumerable beeja, but the more popular ones are Aim (worship of Saraswati), Hrim (worship of maya), Shrim (worship of Lakshmi). Some of these beeja are masculine (eg. klim, denoting the god of desire), while most of them are feminine. The masculine beeja are called deva, whereas the feminine ones are called vidya.

Yantras (Mystical Diagrams)

Mystical diagrams called 'Yantras' are present in every religion, including Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, although known by different names. In Tantra, they are an essential component. A Yantra is a diagrammatic equivalent of the deity, just as Mantra is its sound-equivalent. It is a full representation of the basic power which evolves and maintains an object of worship. When the Yantra is given real potency, the Deity is present there. In the Tantric ritual the Yantra is the object of worship, the image being its tangible representation. There is a fundamental relationship between the Mantra and the Yantra.

Tantra insists that mantras are efficacious, that the diagrams used in the worship are potent, that the deities, or devatas, are conscious entities, that supernatural powers are attained, and that the earnest aspirant experiences the rise of the Kundalini through the different spinal centres (Chakras) and finally realises his identity with Satchidananda.

Tantric Ritual

Let us briefly consider a Tantric ritual as observed in the worship. The aim of Tantra is bhoga-apavarga -- enjoyment, and also liberation. It therefore lays down an endless variety of rituals suited to different times, places, and individual competence.

Usually a Tantric ritual consists in the assigning of the different parts of the body to different deities, the purifying of the elements of the body, breath-control, meditation, imparting of life to the image, and mental and physical worship. These are all calculated to transform the worshipper, the worshipped, the accessories, and the act of worship into consciousness. Harmony on the physical and mental planes are necessary for success in worship, which is created in the gross physical elements by means of prescribed postures, pranayama, japa, and meditation.

In addition, Ablution (snana) purifies the physical body, tarpana gives inner satisfaction, bhutasuddhi frees one of taints, and dhyana enables the worshipper to feel his oneness with the Deity. The last part of the ritual consists of a sacrifice (homa) in which the devotee completely surrenders himself to the Deity, merges in him, and loses his identity in him. At this stage there is no more distinction between the worshipper and the worshipped, the finite and the infinite, the individual and the Absolute.

Realisation

When a sadhaka attains the purity of mind through the ritualistic worship as prescribed in the Tantras, he becomes fit for the realisation of Brahman. It is then that an aspirant finds that the meditator, meditation and the object of meditation are all one.

Tantra as a complete Shastra

Unlike many other spiritual treatise, Tantras are a complete scripture. They discuss philosophy; the form and the function of Varnashrama dharma; duties, responsibilities and penances for the individual; code of conduct to lead the daily life etc. A true follower of Tantra did not need to go to any other dharmashastra for enlightenment.

Works like Mahanirvan Tantra condemned satee, encouraged female education, simplified purificatory rites, and encouraged a life of simplicity and purity. The Tantras reduced the samskaras (ceremonial rites) to ten, instead of the earlier sixteen of the Smritis, and reduced the number of ashrama to two, instead of the earlier four.

Conclusion

Tantra successfully worked out the coordination between karma, jnana, bhakti and yoga to be used by its practitioners for his or her ultimate union with the Supreme Reality.

Being a product of the spiritual cross-currents of Hinduism, it sucked everything connected with religion that was to be found anywhere in India. In turn, it spewed out everything that was beneficial for the mankind. Despite the blemishes and abuses that it received, it continues to give solace to every practising Hindu in its ritualistic, philosophical, and mystic aspects. The concept of transference developed by it is unique in the history of world religions. It is this transference, or sublimation which made millions of materialistic minds to attain a semblance of upliftment.

May be, that is why it continues to exist in one form or the other.

An Overview of the Upanishads

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What are the Upanishads?

The Upanishads are the science of freedom through the knowledge of one's true self.

The Vedas show the way to a blessed life by consecrating one's actions, and they also reveal the science of freedom (mukti) from the world through spiritual efforts. In practice, however, the Vedas were identified with yajna that was believed to produce earthly and heavenly good. This was not to the liking of many whose spiritual urges were not to sate by the heavens and rebirths, which were after all an extension of present existence only. They wanted a more direct approach to spiritual wisdom, bereft of the paraphernalia associated with rituals. That need was fulfilled by the Upanishads.

The Vedas also had the problem of excess. One had to spend the better part of one's life (around 32 years) mastering them! So the Upanishads replaced them as a direct approach to the Divine. With time the Upanishads too grew in large numbers, but as a system of knowledge these never became an overgrown system, since one does not have to read all the Upanishads to make use of them. If one knows any one Upanishad properly, he knows the essence of all the other Upanishads. This gives the Upanishads tremendous vitality, along with the age-old stability—something unusual in the history of human knowledge.

The last sections of each of the four Vedas are known as Upanishad. Since these come at the end of the Vedas, they are known as Vedanta. The term can also be interpreted to mean 'the essence of the Vedas'. The Vedantins treat the Upanishads in this sense only. According to them, the rituals and other subject matter of the Vedas are the preparatory grounds for the final climb to the spiritual truths as presented in the Upanishads.

It is difficult to say how many Upanishads there are. The number is put anywhere between 108 and 1008. Acharya Shankara (c. 8th century), the great unifier of Hindu system of thought, has commented upon eleven principal Upanishads, and has referred to a few more in his commentaries. These Upanishads are respected more than others.

The Upanishads are not easy to understand without a commentary and a proper teacher. The truths presented in the Upanishads (these are not philosophical speculations) are so subtle and profound that only those with extremely sharp and penetrating minds can grasp them fully.

Brahman

The sages realised the Divine as pure consciousness which was the reality beneath all existence. They called it Brahman (the Great) which had no qualifying traits, no attribute, no form, etc. This came to be known as nirguna Brahman, the impersonal God, who is ever present and everywhere present God for whom no adjective can be employed. The subject of discussion in every Upanishad is this. He (or, it) is infinite, ever free, without a form, and beyond the grasp of the human mind. He cannot be called a knowing being, because knowledge belongs to the human mind; he cannot be called a reasoning being, because reasoning is a sign of weakness; he cannot be called a creating being, because none creates except in bondage. The Upanishads describe Brahman as beyond subject-object duality. It is beyond good and bad, and virtue and vice. Brahman is sat (existence), chit (consciousness), and ananda (bliss), since it exists, it is consciousness, and is full of bliss

To know this truth, one has to become one with it, 'The knower of Brahman becomes Brahman'. The triad of knower-knowledge known disappears in that state, and what remains, remains. Only those who have experienced that state know its true nature. But even they cannot describe it for reasons described above. When this reality is perceived through the mind, it appears as having qualities and attributes, and hence it is known as saguna Brahman (God with qualities). This is also known as God, who is merciful, powerful, and with innumerable noble qualities. He is the omnipresent creator, preserver, and destroyer of everything.

The Upanishads talk of both these aspects, but their speciality lies in discussing the impersonal aspect of Brahman.

Knowledge of Reality

According to the sages, the world is important, and hence the knowledge to lead a meaningful life is important, but the key to all knowledge is the knowledge of Brahman. Whatever is in the universe, is Brahman, and hence by knowing it one knows everything, the way one knows the essence of all gold ornaments by knowing about gold. The most accepted method of acquiring the knowledge of Brahman was to go to an accomplished teacher and get groomed into it.

One meaning of the word 'Upanishads' is, to sit near the teacher and master the science of self-knowledge.

Alternatively, the word also means 'the knowledge that results in destroying the identifications of a person with the world'.

The Upanishads were always learnt directly from a teacher, and if not used as a technique of freedom, these were as meaningless as a heap of words. Following this principle, nearly every Upanishad is in the form of a discourse by a teacher who was a renowned sage of the period. Even when a specific teacher is not mentioned, the presence of teacher is palpable in that Upanishad. Thus the authenticity of knowledge imparted by an Upanishad was maintained strictly at a personalised level. It is interesting to know that in spite of a large number of teachers mentioned in the Upanishads, their teachings are invariably the same.

To acquire that knowledge (not mere information) of Brahman, one had to perform intense austerities, known as tapasya. The word comes from the root tap which means 'heat', and also knowledge. When one goes through the blazing heat of tapasya in the form of selfless service, devotion, meditation, scriptural studies, or any other austerities, all the dross of his mind burns up. The mind then becomes calm and fit to receive instructions.

Atman

The Upanishads teach that atman is the true self of every individual, and that it is non-different from Brahman—the individual and the universal are same.

The general approach of the Upanishads is to lead a person from his gross ideas of self to the realisation of himself as the universal self. In one of the Upanishads, the teacher shows how his body, made by food, is his self. From there he leads the student to show vital forces working within his body as the self; then the mind as the self; intelligence as self; the 'I'ness appearing as the thin veil separating him from the universal self as his self; and finally atman as the true self, which is eternally conscious, beyond good and bad, virtue and vice, birth and death, etc.

This spiritual knowledge is not speculative the way philosophy is, but it is intuitive. The technical word for it is non-indirect knowledge, which means that it is different from instinct, sensual, or inferential knowledge. Unlike every other kind of knowledge, spiritual knowledge is not acquired through the mind, but it is the consciousness itself that becomes conscious of its nature.

The example used in Vedanta is that of a clear crystal in front of which a coloured flower is placed. The flower apparently influences the transparent nature of the crystal. But when the flower is removed, the crystal becomes what it was all along—clear. The true self of everyone is exactly like this crystal—free of any tinge.

Aum

Aum is the symbolic representation of both personal and impersonal aspects of God. When one looks at the created world, one realises that every object has three aspects: physical manifestation, verbal representation, and the idea behind the both. Thus every object in this world, seen and unseen, has a name that requires sound produced by the vocal system which begins with the guttural ‘a’, through velar ‘u’, and ending at the lips with ‘m’. By combining these three sounds one gets ‘Aum’, which is the symbolic matrix of all sound, and hence the basis for all names. Since name and objects are non-different, and God being the matrix of all objects, ‘Aum’ is respected as the verbal representation of God. The silence that follows after one pronounces Aum, denotes the impersonal aspect of God, implying that it cannot have any attribute. Hindus may squabble over many other things of their religion, but they all agree on the universality of Aum.

Three Schools

When a spiritual aspirant makes effort to gain knowledge, he first has to get rid of his desires for this life, and also afterlife. As one gains more and more spiritual knowledge through the calmness of his mind, one sees himself as atman, the conscious principle within him. This stage is known as dvaita (duality). If the aspirant continues with his spiritual practices, he comes to realise that the atman that is within him, is the essence of others too. This is known as visishtadvaita (conditional non-dualism). Finally, the aspirant may come to realise that atman (what he took for his individual consciousness) alone exists, and that, it is non-different from Brahman, the ever existent reality, which is by its very nature pure, infinite, eternal, etc. This last state of self-knowledge is known as advaita. Advaita is sometimes referred to as monism, but it is grossly incorrect. Monism implies presence of one, single entity, but Advaita is non-dual, implying that there are no two separate realities like consciousness and inertness, or mind and matter. Advaita implies that there is no way of knowing if it is one, or beyond the idea of one—two, since the mind itself ceases to exist in that state. The best way to describe the state of Advaita is ‘What is, is’; one cannot say anything else about it in defining terms.

The idea of Advaita, although quite incomprehensible by the common minds, is the highest realisation by the Hindu mind, and is its greatest contribution to the world of religions. This state has been compared to mixing pure water with pure water, and as realising oneself as the calm, majestic self instead of the volatile. There are other metaphors too.

When a person realises his identity with the supreme Brahman, popularly known as *aham Brahma asmi* (I am Brahman), one becomes free from the cycle of birth and death. Hinduism thus talks of achieving blessedness here and now, in this very life. One who realises the truth that he is *atman*, is known as *jivanmukta*, free while living. This is the highest spiritual state that has ever been described in any religion, and is unique to Hinduism. This knowledge is undoubtedly the crown jewel of all spiritual knowledge. And, like any precious knowledge acquired by the human race, it has to be preserved at any cost.

Jivanmukti

If Hindu religion has a true distinctive feature, it is this knowledge of *jivanmukti*. Relevance in Present Times The Upanishads are the undiluted philosophy of Hinduism. Every other aspect of Hinduism follows the general principles of Vedanta—man is divine. In fact, every soul, every conscious form, and every particle is divine. The difference between any two life forms, or between inert matter and life form lies in the manifestation of that divinity. A conscious effort at it makes the manifestation more palpable. As a thought system, and also as a way of life, the Upanishads are clearly the power, glory, and the ultimate achievement of the Hindu race. No other contribution by India to the world can ever match the majesty, sublimity, and vitality embodied in these sacred texts.

Gods, Sages and Yajnas in Vedas

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This work offers a bird's eye view on the Vedic gods, sages and the Yajnas that the sages prescribed.

Vedic Gods

Savitr: The word Savitr is derived from the root su, which means to stimulate. The God of Gaytri mantra, who has been meditated upon by millions for thousands of years is pre-eminently a golden deity whose car and its pole are golden. Shining with the rays of the sun, yellow-haired, Savitr raises up his light continually from the east. His ancient paths in the air are dustless and easy to traverse, and on them he protects his worshippers; for he conveys the departed spirit to where the righteous dwell. He removes evil dreams, and makes men sinless. He is also connected with the evening as well as the morning; for at his command night comes and he brings all beings to rest.

Savitr is often distinguished from Surya. In some passages, he is said to shine with the rays of the Sun, to impel the sun, or to declare men sinless to the sun. But in other passages it is hardly possible to keep the two deities apart.

Dyāvā-prthivi: Heaven and Earth are the most frequently named pair of deities in the Rigveda. They are also separately addressed as 'father' and 'mother', since they have made and sustain all creatures; they are also the parents of the gods. At the same time they are in different passages spoken of as themselves created by individual gods.

They never grow old. They are great and wide-extended; they are broad and vast abodes. They grant food and wealth, or bestow great fame and dominion. Sometimes moral qualities are attributed to them. They are wise and promote dharma. As father and mother they guard beings, and protect from disgrace and misfortune.

Rudra: Just like Visnu, Rudra occupies a subordinate position in the Rigveda. It was much later that he became quite prominent in his form as Shiva. The epics and the Puranas drew the character heavily from that of Rudra. The famous mantra traymbakam yajamahe used universally as prayer to Lord Shiva, comes in the Vedas itself.

Rudra has beautiful lips and wears braided hair. His colour is brown, his form is dazzling, he shines like the radiant sun, is arrayed with golden ornaments, and wears a glorious necklace, drives in a car, holds the thunderbolt in his arm, and discharges his lightning shaft from the sky; but he is usually said to be armed with a bow and arrows, which are strong and swift.

He is fierce and destructive, strongest of the strong, swift, unassailable, unsurpassed in might, young and unaging. He is easily invoked and auspicious (siva). He not only preserves from calamity, but bestows blessings. His healing powers are often mentioned; he has a thousand remedies, and is the greatest physician of physicians

Mitra: The association of Mitra with Varuna is so intimate that he practically has no individuality of his own. His very name means 'friend', or 'ally'. In the Persian religion 'Mithra' is a sun-god or a god of light specially connected with the sun. The dual invocation of Mitra-Varuna goes back to the Indo-Iranian period, for Ahura and Mithra are coupled in the Avesta. In the Brahmanas, Mitra is connected with day, and Varuna with night. Uttering his voice, Mitra marshals men and watches the tillers with an unwinking eye. Like Varuna, he is upholder of laws, and Visnu takes his three steps by the laws of Mitra

Brihaspati: Brhiaspati is a purely Indian god, and is also called 'Brahmana pati'-- 'Lord of prayer'. Addressed as the father of the gods, he is said to have blown forth their births. Like Agni, he is the priest of the gods. He is the generator of all prayers, and without him sacrifice does not succeed. His song goes to heaven, and he is associated with singers. He is said to help and protect the pious man, to prolong life, and to remove disease.

In the later literature, he plays a very important role as the priest of gods, and tries to defeat the power of Shukracharya, the priest of the asuras.

Usas: Decked in gay attire like a dancer, clothed in light, Usha (early morning) appears in the east and unveils her charms. Rising resplendent as from a bath she comes with light, driving away the darkness and removing the black robe of night. She is young, being born again and again, though ancient. Shining with a uniform hue, she also wastes away the life of mortals.

She drives away evil dreams, evil spirits, and the hated darkness. She discloses the treasures concealed by darkness, and distributes them bountifully. She awakens every living being to motion. When Usas shines forth, the birds fly up from their nests and men seek nourishment. Day by day appearing at the appointed place, she never infringes the ordinance of nature and of the gods. She renders good service to the gods by awakening all worshippers and causing the sacrificial fires to be kindled.

Usas is closely associated with the Sun. Since she precedes the Sun, she is occasionally regarded as his mother. She is also called the sister, or the elder sister of Night and their names are often conjoined as a dual compound (usasa-nakta). As the sacrificial fire is kindled at dawn, Usas causes Agni to be kindled, and Agni goes to meet the shining Dawn as she approaches.

Usas brings the worshipper wealth and children, bestowing protection and long life.

Parjanya: The name literally means 'rain-cloud', but he is frequently described as a bull that quickens the plants and the earth. The shedding of rain is his most prominent characteristic. He flies around with a watery car, and loosens the water-skin. In this activity he is associated with thunder and lightning. He is in a special degree the producer and nourisher of vegetation, and by implication Earth is his wife.

Pusan: His individuality is vague, and his traits are scanty. He wears braided hair, a beard and carries a golden spear. His car is drawn by goats instead of horses. With his golden aerial ships, Pusan acts as the messenger of Surya. He sees all creatures clearly and at once. He also conducts the dead on the far-off path of the Fathers, is a guardian of roads, removing dangers out of the way, protects cattle and brings them home unhurt and driving back the lost.

Āpas: These are the waters who follow the path of the gods. The deification of the Waters is pre-Vedic, for they are invoked as apo in the Avesta also.

Indra, armed with the bolt, dug out a channel for them, so they never infringe his ordinances. They are celestial as well as terrestrial, and the sea is their goal. King Varuna moves in their midst, looking down on the truth and the falsehood of men. They are also mothers to Agni. They give their auspicious fluid like loving mothers, and they purify, carrying away defilement. They also cleanse moral guilt, the sins of violence, cursing, and lying.

Vísve devāh: The comprehensive group called Vísve devāh occupies an important position. Probably it is an artificial sacrificial group intended to include all the gods in order that none should be left out during sacrifices, or prayer.

Yama: Yama is the chief of all the dead whose last rites were performed according to Vedic rites. He is not expressly designated a god, but only a being who rules over the dead. His father is Vivasvat, and he is said to have chosen death of his own will to find out the path for many, to where the ancient Fathers passed away. Thus, death is the path of Yama.

As the first father of mankind and the first of those that died, Yama appears to have originally been regarded as a mortal who became the chief of the souls of the departed. He is associated with Varuna, Brihaspati, and especially Agni, the conductor of the dead, who is called his friend and his priest.

Yama dwells in the remote recess of the sky. In his abode, which is the home of the gods, he is surrounded by songs and the sound of the flute. The owl and the pigeon are mentioned as his messengers, but the two four-eyed, broad-nosed, bridled dogs, sons of Sarama are his regular emissaries. They guard the path along which the dead man hastens to join the Fathers who rejoice with Yama. They watch men and wander among the peoples as Yama's messengers, but not in a bad sense. Yama is invoked to lead his worshippers to the gods, and to prolong life.

Vāta: Vata's name is connected with forms of the root va, (blow), which is also used for the name of Vayu. Vata is the breath of the gods, and like Rudra he has a hand in healing and prolonging life. He has the treasure of immortality in his house. His activity is chiefly mentioned in connection with the thunderstorm.

Purusa: There are seven hymns dealing with the creation of the world as produced from some material. In the well-known Purusa sukta, the gods are the agents of creation, while the material out of which the world is made is the body of Purusa, the God. The act of creation is here treated as a sacrifice in which Purusa is the victim, whose body parts became the universe. The Vedas sprung from him, the animals and plants were born of him, and the castes of men came out of him.

Pitras: They are the blessed dead who dwell in the third heaven. The term as a rule applies to the first ancestors who followed the ancient paths.

The Pitaras are classed as higher, lower, and middle, as earlier and later, who though not always known to their descendants, are known to Agni. They receive oblations as their food and are entreated to hear, intercede for, and protect their worshippers, and besought not to injure their descendants for any sin humanly committed against them. They are invoked to give riches, children, and long life to their sons, who desire to be in their good graces.

The path trodden by the Fathers (pitr yāna) is different from that trodden by the gods (deva yāna).

Vedic Rishis

Vāchaspatyam, the ancient Sanskrit to Sanskrit dictionary, defines rishi as: rishati jñānena samsāra-pāram (one who reaches beyond this transmigratory world by means of spiritual knowledge). Etymologically, the word may also mean "to see" or "to realise" spiritual truths.

Going through the Vedas, we realise that it would have been impossible for an ordinary poet, or even an spiritual aspirant to have the wisdom that have been recorded in the Vedas. Commenting on the special attainments of the Vedic rishis, Max Muller said that "these sages climbed up to the heights where their lungs only could breathe, and where those of other beings would have burst." These greats followed reason and meditation wherever it led them, no matter at what cost. They just did not care if all their best beliefs were smashed, never cared for what society of them, or talked about them. That is how they became what they became.

Coming to more realistic plane, we find each hymn of the Rig Veda traditionally attributed to a specific rishi, and the "family books" (Rigveda: 2-7) are said to have been the spiritual wisdom received by the various families. The main families, listed by the number of verses ascribed to them are:

Angirasas: 3619 (especially Mandala 6); Kanvas: 1315 (especially Mandala 8); Vasishtas: 1267 (Mandala 7) ; Viswamitras: 983 (Mandala 3); Atris: 885 (Mandala 5); Bhrigus: 473; Kashyapas: 415 (part of Mandala 9); Grtsamadas: 401 (Mandala 2); Agastyas: 316; and Bharatas: 170.

Of these, three families stand out as connected with fire sacrifices: Angirasaa, Atharvan, and Bhrigu. As sages, they carried an aura around them, and were respected as divine, having humbled even the gods in their feud with them. Some other sages like Atri were deified to be made one of the seven sages of saptarshi mandala.

Manu, as a sage is the living equivalent of what is Yama for the dead. He is also the son of Vivasat, as Yama is, and is considered to be the progenitor of the human race. His name is connected more with the deluge during which the Lord came as Mina Avatara.

Viswamitra and Vasistha became more famous as the sage connected with the life of Sri Ramachandra. However, their feud and rivalry became so famous that these stories and their outcome have entered the Indian lore.

Not much is known about the Vedic sages other than what we get in the epics and the Puranas. The little that we gather about them from the later works makes us feel that they considered themselves mere instruments in receiving the divine wisdom and knowledge for the benefit of the mankind.

Despite their impersonal way of life in which rituals and meditation occupied their nearly whole of waking hours, they unknowingly left behind a way of life that was later on emulated by the Brahmins for centuries to come.

Rishikas -- The Female sages

We come across quite a few names of the rishikas (women Rishis) in the Vedas. Probably none of them was the composers of the Vedic mantras, but they were definitely samhitākartās, who assisted in the collection of the Veda mantras. Since the sages normally led a married life, and had children who grew up in the Vedic atmosphere, it was quite natural to have some great rishikas.

Some famous great female sages are: Maitreyi who was Yajnavalkya's wife; Gargi, who challenged Yajnavalkya with her sharp questions, Lopamudra (wife of Agastya), who has two mantras (RV I.179.1-2) attributed to her, Roamasa the wife of Svanya, Visvavara belonging to the Atri family, Angirasi Sarasvati of Angirasa family, Apala of the Atri family, Yami Vaivasvati, Straddha, Ghosha, Urvasi, Sarama, Poulomi, and others. Most of them are mentioned in the Rigveda.

Yajna: Vedic rites and sacrifices

Broadly speaking, religious acts of an individual, or of a group is yajna (religious sacrifice).

Under normal conditions, every act of a person is mundane, and at times, even profane. But when those very acts are performed with a religious outlook, they become yajna. Even the simple act of breathing can be transformed into a sacrifice (Gita, IV.29) when it is performed with proper attitude. Thus yajna (sacrifice) is the consecration of the mundane to the divine. It is the transformation of the profane into the sacred; is the bridge between the material and the spiritual; and is the instrument to convert the belittled to the exalted.

For a person to be spiritual, his acts have to be spiritualised, and for that every act of his has to become a yajna. That is why even the act of creation by Purusha (God) was perceived as a yajna by the Vedic sages, and was described so (Purusa Sukta, Rig Veda X. 90). But, it is impossible for a common man to treat every act of his as a yajna, which means that an easier way has to be found for his upward journey towards spirituality.

It was to solve this problem that the Vedic sages came up with the solution of public and private yajna for all. Soon they had framed methods by which the life of an individual and the society could be regulated by sacrificial acts. In

birth, death, marriage, acquisition, renunciation, sorrow, joy, victory, loss -- there came up a yajna.

Slowly these yajnas diversified into sacraments (samskaras), and sacrifices (offerings and oblations). The sacraments for the individual's private life (like marriage, sacred thread ceremony, funeral rites etc.) grew up to forty in number, but was later brought down to eighteen, then to sixteen in the Smriti period, and finally to ten in the Tantra system. Most Hindus now follow these ten samskaras. A brief overview of the samskaras will be given in "An Overview of the Smritis " .

The yajna which were not sacramental (i.e. not a samskara) were characterised by offering of oblations to various deities and personalities. The oblations (haviH) meant for gods were poured as ahuti into fire, known as homa , whereas the offerings made to the ancestors and the demigods (Nirriti and the Rakshasas) were known as bali and were placed on the strewn grass, or put in water. These practises continue even today. It is believed that in the early days, even the offerings to gods were not made in the fire, but were placed on the ground, or strewn grass, but later on nearly all the offerings were made into fire (Agni got a severe stomach problem due to this, as narrated in Mahabharata).

Here we discuss only the fire sacrifices addressed to the gods.

The Vedic yajna are prayer to the divine in anticipation of something in which the offering (including the sacrificial goat) effects the communication between the mundane and the sacred; and the priest acts both as the agent of the sacrificer and the mouthpiece of the gods.

These fire sacrifices had: a) one single fire used in domestic rites, or b) three fires for bigger sacrifices. In case of the three fires, the most important fire used to be the Gārhapatya (of the master of the house), which descended from the domestic hearth of the sacrificer, and was kept perpetually burning. All oblations were cooked in this fire. To its east used to be Āhāvaniya fire, in which offerings were made. To the south of the Gārhapatya, the dakshina agni used to be set, in which the fire used to be brought at the end of a sacrifice.

The Vedic rites can be classified into two groups: Grihya (domestic) and Shrauta (public), which were characterised respectively by the absence and the presence of priests. Grihya sacrifices included the individual samskaras (purificatory sacraments), a daily sacrifice called mahayajna (great sacrifice), and seven pākajanya (cooked sacrifices).

The Shrauta sacrifices consisted of haviryajna, and Somayajna. The haviryajna were performed with grains, ghee, milk etc., whereas the Somayajna were performed with soma juice. These sacrifices were again categorised as nitya (daily), naimittika (occasional), kāmya (with a specific desire), and prāyaschitta (penance).

Some of the famous Vedic rites are:

Agnihotra: This was the twice daily pouring (at sunrise and sunset) of oblation (mostly milk) in the sacrificial fire by the family. The ritual was performed by a priest for his own or the benefit of a sponsor (yajamāna). This sacrifice was considered purificatory in nature, and is still practised by some.

Darshapaurṇamasa: This was performed on the new moon and the full moon days.

Agrāyana: This involved offering of newly produced grains in different seasons.

Chāturmāsya: These were the four monthly rites which used to be started in the beginning of any of the three seasons: spring, rainy, or the autumn.

Agnishtoma: It was performed annually in the spring season in the praise of Agni.

Pravargya: It was an oblation offered to Ashvins of goat's and cow's milk heated in a vessel.

Vājapeya: This was done to celebrate a great victory by the king. It lasted from 17 days to a year.

Rājasuya: It was the consecration of a famous king in which great expenses were made. In the Mahabharata period Yudhisthira performed this yajna.

Aswamedha: This was a complex sacrifice marked to prove the sovereignty of a king. After the sacrifice, the king was known as Chakravarty. Raja Ramachandra had performed this yajna.

Sarvamedha: It was a ten day sacrifice, in which a person sacrificed everything he had. It was performed for the sake of gaining and winning every kind of food, and attaining supremacy.

Prayer

Along with the growth and consolidation of the yajnas, prayer to the divine also grew in importance. In the Vedas prayers are linked with the sacrifices in the form of a formula (yajus), pronounced in a low voice. There were also declamations of verses, called shastras, in which 'Aum' was inserted at regular interval.

References are also made in the Vedas to an 'internal' mental sacrifice which can be used in cases of urgency. The part played by thought, side by side with word and action is emphasised many times in various hymns. Later on this concept was taken up by various religious systems as manasā- vācā - karmanā, and a devotee was advised to offer all his acts of thinking, speaking, and doing to the Lord.

Although prayer played an integral role in any sacrifice, with time it grew independent of the yajna. The independence and the autonomy of prayer ensured its own dynamics, and it soon became powerful enough to overthrow the role of sacrifices in a spiritual life altogether. When the scholars try to present Upanishadic thoughts as a revolt of the Kshatriyas against the Brahmins, they overlook the fact that the Upanishads are the natural outcome of the power of prayer to the Self. Any open religious system is sure to reach the state where prayer becomes the essential part of its outlook. Prayers are a kind of paradigm shift in spirituality -- a fact that was recognised and practised by the Vedic sages more than five thousand years ago.

Sections of the Vedas

Brāhmanas

The discussion till now has been on the Samhitā portion of the Vedas. As mentioned earlier, the Vedas have three more sections: Brāhmana, Āranyaka, and Upanishads. Of these, the Upanishads continue to influence the lives and philosophy of the Hindus, but the other two reached a dead end long ago, after giving birth to more specialised branches of religion connected with the issues discussed in them.

Commenting on Taittiriya Samhita 1.2.1, Bhatta Bhaskara defines 'Brahmanas' as texts which expound the Vedic mantras and Yajnas. In chapter 2 of his Kavyamimansa, Rajasekhar defines the Brahmanas as texts which are characterised by statements of eulogy, censure, exposition and (ritual) application (of mantras). The word is used distinctively to denote certain texts for the first time in Taittiriya Samhita 3.7.1.1

Many scholars, modern and ancient, have tried to define the Brahmanas by stating their characteristics. The reality however is that there is no sharp difference in the character of the Mantra and the Brahmana portions of the Vedas. The only thing that we may state safely is this – Mantras are those portions of the Vedas that are designated as such traditionally. And the rest is Brahmana.

Vedic sages felt that there was nothing that could not be achieved by sacrifices – the sun could be stopped from rising, and Indra, the chief of gods, could be deposed from his throne. The Samhitā contain the mantras that are required in various sacrifices, but the methodology and the science of the rituals and sacrifices required a separate kind of work.

With the growth of Samhitā literature, the corresponding science of performing the yajna also increased in bulk. With time, these were collected in a special class of literature which was known as Brāhmana. The formulas and rules for conducting extremely complex rituals are explained to the minutest detail in these works, and, every ritual is performed with a specific purpose, for which a specific result is described. Thus, for each Samhitā, there were a number of Brāhmana, which are treated as the Veda itself. Unlike the Samhitā, the Brāhmana are exclusive prose works, although some are accented.

In addition to these, the Brāhmanas also contain myths, legends, and narratives to explain or rationalise the then religious practices. The duties of men professing different occupations, the eternity of the Veda, popular customs, cosmogony, historical details, praise of ancient heroes are some other subjects dealt with in the Brahmanas. The later philosophical speculations concerning the Self were also a part of the Brāhmana, but later it broke free to become a separate section.

Thus, the Brāhmana literature can be classified under three sections:

1. vidhi, which are the practical sacrificial directions
2. arthavāda, (eulogy) which are the explanations of meanings and purpose of the sacrifices
3. upanishads, the later philosophical developments which focus on "I am That."

The staunch traditionalists, however, accept only vidhi and arthavada as the Vedas.

As in the case of Samhitā, a major portion of the Brāhmana literature has been lost, but what has reached our hands, forms an extensive literature.

The Brāhmana are indispensable if one wants to understand the later religious and philosophical literature of Hinduism. These works are also important to understand the history, science, and growth of priesthood and sacrifices. Most of the beliefs practised in modern Hinduism has been adapted from these works.

The famous Brāhmanas:

Rig Veda

- * Aitareya Brāhmana: It deals with Soma sacrifices, Agnihotra, and Rajasuya yajna.
- * Kausītaki/Sāṅkhāyana Brāhmana: It deals with Soma sacrifices and the food sacrifices.

Samaveda

- * Tāndya Maha Brāhmana/ Panchavimsa: It contains some very old legends and the details of a sacrificial ceremony (Vrātyastomas) by which Vrātyas (total outcastes) were received in the Brahminical fold.
- * Sadvimsa Brāhmana: It deals with miracles and omens
- * Jaiminīya Brāhmana: It has legends and the history of religion
- * Chāndogya Brāhmana: The first two 'lessons' deal with ceremonies relating to birth and marriage; whereas the last eight 'lessons' constitute the famous Chāndogya Upanishad.
- * Sāmvidhāna, Devatādhyana, Vamsha, Samhitopanishat Brahmanas: These four Brāhmanas are very short, and are not really treated as Brāhmana.
- * Sātyāyana Brāhmana: It is only found in quotations of Sayanacharya.

Krishna Yajurveda

- * Taittiriya Brāhmana: This Brāhmana is in addition to the commentary already interspersed in the Samhitā. It also contains Kāthaka portion of Brāhmana, which otherwise is considered lost. The text details various sacrifices and also narrates some legends.

Shukla Yajurveda

- * Shatapatha Brāhmana: It is in a hundred chapters, and is the most extensive and the most important of all the available Brāhmanas. It has two recension -- Kāṇva, and the Mādhyandina. The work deals with sacrificial matters, sacred thread ceremony, svādhyāya (self study of scriptures), and some special sacrifices like Asvamedha.

Atharva Veda

- * Gopatha Brāhmana: This is the only available Brāhmana of the Atharvaveda. In this work we have Upanishad texts like the Pranava Upanishad.

Evolution of the religious ideal in the Brāhmaṇa:

Japa: The rationale of the sacrifices were discussed threadbare in the Brāhmaṇa, but that did not satisfy every mind. Questions were raised against sacrifices and their methodology. Even gods themselves started becoming redundant. And with all this kind of mental activity poured into the analysis of the rites and their explanation, abstractions were increasing rapidly in the Vedic religion.

As the sacrifices were glorified and given power even over the Vedic gods, the power of the word increased. Japa (the practice of chanting a mantra silently) of 'Aum' practised ascetically with the sacrifices was believed to produce all one's desires. At the same time knowledge was beginning to be valued. In one exchange mind says that speech merely imitates it, but speech emphasises the importance of expression and communication; however, Prajapati decides that mind is more important than the word.

In the long run, the sacrifices went away, the gods went away, prayers and chant went away. What remained was only japam of the sacred 'Aum'. Later, this was also given up to pave way for meditation.

Tapasyā: Prajapati was the father of both the gods and the demons. The ethical principle of truth became stronger as the gods were described as truthful and the demons as not so truthful. However, realising the ways of the world, many complained that the demons grew strong and rich (as people complain even today of those who become successful by taking the wrong path). Instead of telling that the demons would perish due to their own karma, emphasis was laid on the power of goodness. The gods were advised to perform sacrifice, or perish. The gods performed sacrifices that made them triumph over the demons, and also helped them attain Truth.

To emphasise the power of tapas and sacrifice, it was said that Prajapati practised tapas to create the world by the heat of his own tapasya. Prajapati not only created, but also entered into things as form and name, giving them order. In the later literature, Prajapati was replaced by Brahma, who was identified with Truth and became the Creator God in the trinity that included Vishnu and Shiva.

Self Analysis: A judgement after death using a scale to weigh good against evil is described in the Satapatha Brāhmaṇa. The text recommends that the one who knows this will balance one's actions in this world so that in the next the good deeds will rise, not the evil ones. This concept, however, underwent a great change in later times, and spiritual aspirants were advised to discriminate between the Real and the unreal to attain spiritual wisdom.

Rebirth: Belief in repeated lives through reincarnation is indicated in several passages in the Brāhmanas. A beef-eater is punished by being born as a strange and sinful creature. However, as knowledge rivalled the value of ritual, this new problem of how to escape from an endless cycle of rebirth presented itself automatically, which led to the more abstract philosophy of the Upanishads.

A few Selections from the Brāhmana

** Bhrigu, the son of Varuna was devoted to learning. Unfortunately his learning made him egotistic and he thought that he was superior to all, including the gods and his own father. So Varuna decided to make him grow in humility, and had his life breath stopped. This made Bhrigu enter the worlds of death. In the first he saw someone cut another man to pieces and eat him; in the second, one man was eating another who was screaming, and in the third a man was silently screaming. In another world there were two women guarding a treasure, and at one place a stream of blood was guarded by a naked black man with a club, while a stream of butter provided all the desires of golden men in golden bowls. In the sixth world five rivers of blue and white lotuses were flowing. There also was the river of honey, wonderful music, celestial nymphs dancing and singing, and a fragrance enveloping the whole region.

When Bhrigu returned, his father explained to him that the first man represented people who in ignorance destroyed trees, which in turn ate them; the second were those who cooked animals that cried out and in the other world were eaten by them in return; the third were those who ignorantly cooked rice and barley, which screamed silently and also ate them in return; the two women were Faith and non-Faith; the river of blood represented those who squeezed the blood out of a Brahmin, and the naked black man guarding the river was Anger; but the true sacrificers were the golden men, who got the river of butter and the paradise of the five rivers. -- Satpatha Brahmana XI.6.1

** "Prajapati alone existed before this Universe came into being. The word certainly was his only possession. Therefore, the word was the second. He desired: 'Let me emit this very word, it will pervade this whole (space). He emitted the word and it pervaded the whole (space). It rose upwards and spread, as a continuous (well joined) stream of water.'" -- Tāndya Brāhmana 20.14.2

** "Some ask- 'If a man establishes the sacrificial fire and then dies while touring abroad, then how does one do his Agnihotra? To this, we reply that it is to be performed by offering the oblation of the milk of a cow which has been suckled by a calf that is not its own. This is because the milk of such a

cow is akin in nature to the Agnihotra of such a dead man. Alternately, perform the Agnihotra with the milk of any cow. Others state the relatives of the dead man should keep the alters of that man fired up without offering sacrificial oblations till the bones of the dead man have been collected after cremation of his corpse. And if the corpse is not traceable, then twigs from 360 'flame of the forest' trees should be cut and fashioned into a human figure. This should then be cremated with full ceremony and at that time, the fires from the altar established by the dead man should be extinguished by a transfer to his funeral pyre. The likeness of the corpse should be created in this manner- 150 twigs for the torso, 140 for the twigs for the two thighs. 50 for the legs and the rest should be placed above its head. Thus ends the procedure for the atonement performed for a man who establishes a sacrificial fire in the altar but dies while touring abroad."

-- Aitareya Brāhmaṇa XXXII.1-2

Āranyakas

As appendices to nearly all the Brāhmaṇas are the texts known as Āranyakas (lit. forest texts). The main content of these texts are the mysticism and symbolism of sacrifice and priestly philosophy. In turn these Āranyakas end in the Upanishads. Although the very orthodox Vedic schools did not give much importance to the Āranyakas and the Upanishads, these are extremely important for the Vedānta philosophy. The Vedāntins do not see Upanishads as the end of the Vedas, but as the final aim of the Vedas.

The Aranyakas were called the forest texts because the ascetics who taught them used to retreat into the forest, and the disciples used to follow them there. This resulted in a loss of emphasis on the sacrificial rites that were performed in the villages and the towns. It is believed that these texts were for the Vānaprasthis (those who had completed their worldly duties and renounced them), who were supposed to meditate on the mystical significance of the sacrifices only. Thus the Aranyakas were the transitional link between the Brāhmaṇas and the Upanishads; they discussed rites, had magical content, lists of formulas and the hymns from the Vedas, but also had the early speculations and intellectual discussions that finally flowered in the Upanishads.

The Taittirīya Aranyaka tells how when some great sages were approached by some ordinary sages for instruction, they refused. But when the sages came back with faith and tapas, they were instructed.

The sense of social morality also started growing: truth was considered to be the highest value, debtors were in fear of punishment in hell, and immorality was condemned.

The emphasis now was on spiritual knowledge. The concept of prana as the life energy of the breath was exalted and was declared to be present in trees, animals, and people in ascending order. Human immortality was identified with the atman, and not with the body. Hell was still feared, but it was believed that by practising tapasya, one could hope to be born in a better world after death or be liberated from rebirth. Non-attachment (Vairagya) was also declared to be the great purifier of the body and the liberator from the cycle of life and death.

Brahman, the Supreme Reality, and Atman, the individual's essence, were now more important than gods and sacrifices. The guardians of the spiritual treasures of the community were called Brahmapurushas (those who discussed Brahman).

The Various Āranyakas

Rig Veda: Aitaraya, Kaushitaki or Shāṅkhyāyana

Krishna Yajurveda: Taittiriya, Maitrāyaṇi,

Shukla Yajurveda: Brihadaranyaka (two recensions)

Samaveda: Chhandogya, Jaiminiya

A few Selections from the Aranyaka

“They said: ‘Sir, you are the teacher, you are the teacher. What has been said has been duly fixed in mind by us. Now answer a further question. Fire, air, Aditya (sun), time, prana, food, Brahma, Rudra, Vishnu- some meditate upon one, some meditate upon another. Tell us- which one is the best for us?’

Then he replied to them: “All these are merely the manifest forms of Brahman, the Immortal, the Formless. To whichever form each man is devoted here, in the realm of that deity does that man rejoice. For it has been said- ‘This whole is Brahman (Brahma khalvidam vāṁ sarvaṁ). These, which are its manifest forms that one meditates on, worships and finally discards. For, by meditation upon these forms, one moves to higher and higher realms, and when all things perish, one attains unity with the Purusha!’” -- Maitrayani Aranyaka

‘He by Whom all this Universe is pervaded-- the earth and the mid region, the heaven and the quarters and the sub-quarters, that Purusha is fivefold and is constituted of 5 elements. He who has attained the Supreme Knowledge through Sannyāsa (renunciation) is indeed this Purusha. He is all that is in the present, was in the past and will be in the future. Though apparently human, his true nature is that which is settled by the Vedas and what is attained by his new birth is in right knowledge. He is firmly established in the richness of knowledge imparted by his teacher, as also in his faith and in Truth. He has become the self resplendent. Being such a one, He remains beyond the darkness of ignorance. O Aruni! Having become one possessed of

knowledge by realising Him, the Supreme, through sannyasa, and with your mind fixed in your heart, do not again fall a prey to death, because sannyasa is the supreme means of spiritual realisation, therefore wise men declare that to be above all the means of liberation.' -- Taittiriya Aranyaka, X.79

'Thereafter, when the body is made fit for a state of desirelessness, he should be bent over the offering to Brahman. In this way, he will drive repeated deaths away. "The Soul is to be envisioned, to be heard, to be thought of and to be meditated upon." "Him (the Soul) they aspire to know by reciting the Vedas, by practicing the rigors of studentship (including celibacy), by asceticism, by faith, by ritual sacrifices and by fasting" says Sage Mandukeya. "Therefore, he who knows this should, becoming tranquil, restrained (in senses), still in meditation, enduring of the opposites and immersed in faith, perceive the Soul in his own soul," thus says Sage Madavya. That Purusha, who lives in the midst of life forces, and is a repository of consciousness, is incomprehensible and ought to be distinguished (from the animate and inanimate creation) as 'Not this, Not this'." "This Soul alone is the Kshatriya, it is the Brahminhood, it is all the divine beings, the Vedas, all the worlds, it is all beings, indeed it is all! This Soul is that is designated by 'Tat tvam asi' (That Thou are). This Soul is to be comprehended in 'I am Brahman'. This Brahman (the Supreme Soul), without any predecessor, without any superior, without another equivalent, immanent in all, without an exterior (i.e. all pervading), is this Soul-- the Brahman (the Supreme Being), the entity that experiences everything in the Universe-- such is the doctrine"- says Sage Yajnavalkya. ' --- Shāṅkhyāyana Aranyaka

The Upanishads

There are as many Upanishads to each Veda as there are Sakhas, branches or recension, i.e., 21, 102 (according to some, 109), 1000 and 50 respectively to the four Vedas (The Rig-Veda, The Yajur-Veda, The Sama-Veda and the Atharva-Veda). However, just like the lost recension, the corresponding Upanishads are also lost.

According to various sources, there are different number of important Upanishads, but Acharya Shankara has commented upon eleven: Isa, Kena, Katha, Mundaka, Mandukya, Prasna, Aitareya, Taittiriya, Chhandogya, Brihadaranyaka, and Svetasvatara. There are some upanishads coming from very old times other than these, but nearly all of the other upanishads (including Allahopanishad) is a later addition. These later works claim to belong to the lost portions of the Vedas, which can neither be proved nor disproved.

The fundamental principle governing the Upanishads is the great spiritual realisation that "Atman is Brahman" -- the individual is one with the Universal.

Because of their importance and vastness, the Upanishads will be discussed in a separate section.

The Vedangas

From the aspect of the spiritual tradition, the Vedangas do not have much importance, because they act as auxiliaries to the Vedas. These subjects of study were quite important for the performance of Vedic rites and sacrifices, but they had no direct role in the spiritual life of a person. In later times, the evolved branches of these Vedangas were taken up by the greats of their fields and made into a complete shastra, which when followed devotedly, could take one to the realisation of the Supreme Reality.

There are six Angas or explanatory limbs, to the Vedas: Sikshā (Phonetics), Vyakarana (Grammar), Chhanda (Prosody metre), Nirukta (etymology), Jyotisha (Astronomy and astrology), Kalpa (Srauta, Grihya, Dharma and Sulba).

Sikshā: In the Taittiriya Upanishad there is the famous mantra: " Aum. We will expound siksha, or the science of pronunciation. It deals with sound, pitch, quantity, force, modulation and combination. Thus is explained the lesson on pronunciation."

As mentioned in the above Upanishad, Sikshā was the science of pronunciation. The oldest phonetics textbooks are the Prātishakyas that describe pronunciation and intonation as well as the rules of sandhi of the vedic Sanskrit. These books were specific to the individual Shakhas of the Vedas. With time, more popular versions of these Prātishakhya came into existence which were known as siksha.

The importance of the study of this branch of study has been beautifully stressed in a popular story (Taittiriya Samhitā, 2.4.12): Tvasta, the divine carpenter wanted to take a revenge on Indra, and hence conducted a yajna to beget a son who would destroy Indra. When he chanted the mantra, 'Indrasatur varddhasva...' , he went wrong in intonation: he was supposed to pronounce "indra" without raising or lowering the syllables in it, whereas "tru" and "rddha" should have been raised (udatta). Had Tvasta pronounced correctly, it would have meant 'May Tvasta's son grow to be the slayer of Indra'. Unfortunately because of the wrong intonation, the mantra now meant, 'May Indra grow to be killer of this son (of mine).' Consequently, Tvasta's son was killed by Indra, although there was no change in the wordings of the mantra, only the change in the stress of the letters caused this havoc.

Vyākaraṇa: The Vedic grammar is lost forever but the remnant of it can be found in the works of Panini's grammar.

Chhandas: This the science of prosody. There are very few books left on this subject, that too of very late origin. Sutras of Pingala on metrics is one of the more famous one, but this was also recorded much after the Vedic period.

Chhandas expound the 'metres of the gods', the 'metres of Asuras' etc., and treat the seven famous metres of the Vedas, along with the other complex metres. Reflections on the names and forms of metres, and the mysticism of the syllable and of the verse were developed to an extraordinary extent in the hymns of the Samhitā, and also the Brāhmanas.

Nirukta: This Vedanga is the philosophy of etymology, but deals exclusively with the words of Rig veda. Yaska's Nirukta is the only famous work that has come down to us, which in itself is the commentary of an earlier work, Nighantu. It is in the form of explanations of words, and is the basis for later lexicons and dictionaries.

Jyotisha: The importance of the Vedic sacrifices necessitated the drawing up of the calendar for rituals and fix the proper times for the sacrifices. This meant that the sages had to study the movements of the planets and observe the celestial phenomena in detail. It was thus that the science of astronomy and astrology came up in India.

Kalpa: It is the description of the methodology of ritual. To help the priests perform the various details connected with a sacrifice, a kind of manual was worked out. With time every Veda had its own handbook (written in short form, known as sutra) of rituals, which came to be known as Kalpa. Thus the Shrauta Sutras (dealing with public sacrifices), Grihya Sutras which concern domestic life and the Dharma Sutras which deal with ethics, customs and laws -- all belong to Kalpa. The Sulba, which treat of the measurements necessary for laying out the sacrificial area, also belong to Kalpa.

Among the Kalpa Sutras, the works of Asvalayana, Sankhayana, Gobhila, Katyayana, Apastamba, Hiranyakesi, Bodhayana, Bharadvaja are more famous.

In later times, the Kalpa evolved into Smriti literature of law books, of which Manusmriti became the most famous.

Conclusion

The Hindus consider the Vedas to be synonymous with knowledge. However, even a brief survey of the Vedas, as presented in this short monograph, is

enough to make one realise that the Vedas (which include the rituals, the code of conduct, mythologies, and the philosophy of Vedanta) are synonymous with religion. Whatever principle or practice is there in the religious world can be found in the Vedas, although not every religion can be traced to it. Swami Vivekananda says, '... the Vedanta, applied to the various ethnic customs and creeds of India, is Hinduism. The first stage, i.e. Dvaita, applied to the ideas of the ethnic groups of Europe, is Christianity; as applied to the Semitic groups, Mohammedanism. The Advaita, as applied in its Yoga-perception form, is Buddhism etc. Now by religion is meant the Vedanta; the applications must vary according to the different needs, surroundings, and other circumstances of different nations.'

The spiritual experiences of Sri Ramakrishna have once again proved that the Vedas are infallible. The experiences portrayed in many of the hymns of the Vedas were thought to be poetic in nature by the scholars, but Sri Ramakrishna had those experiences even before he knew of the existence of such Vedic passages.

It is wrong to search for any kind of religious evolution in the Vedas; the ideas are as they are. The Vedic sages meditated upon the various aspects of the external and the internal nature to come up with the ultimate spiritual solution to the enigmas that presented themselves to these sages. Naturally it is impossible to say which of these enigmas were more advanced in nature when they came to the sages. Further, if it be accepted that the Vedas are the revelations received in the transcendental state of a pure mind, then it would be wrong to conclude that there can be any evolution in it. It would be more like concluding that the words of Sri Ramakrishna are later than the words of a novice of the twenty-first century, simply because Sri Ramakrishna's words are spiritually more perfect. So, one must accept the Vedas as they are.

Every student of religion and every devout Hindu has to go back to the Vedas if he wants to make his life blessed.

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An Overview of the Vedas

By Swami Samarpanananda

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Swami Vivekananda's Vision

While travelling through the length and breadth of India, Swami Vivekananda once reached Punjab, where he had a strange vision. He saw an old man standing on the banks of the Indus, and chanting Vedic hymns, using intonations that were distinctly different from those used in modern times. The passage that he heard was:

Āvahi varadé devi tyaksharé brahmavādinī

Gāytri chandasām mātā brahmayoni namo'stu té

--"O come! Thou Effulgent One, Thou Bestower of Blessings, Signifier of Brahman in three letters! Salutation be to Thee, O Gayatri, Mother of Vedic Mantras, Thou who hast sprung from Brahman!"

Talking about that vision, Swamiji was to say later, 'I saw an old man seated on the bank of the great river. Wave upon wave of darkness was rolling in upon him, and he was chanting from the Rig Veda. Then I awoke and went on chanting. They were the tones that we used long ago... Shankarâchârya had caught the rhythm of the Vedas, the national cadence. Indeed I always imagine that he had some vision such as mine when he was young, and recovered the ancient music that way. Anyway, his whole life's work is nothing but that, the throbbing of the beauty of the Vedas and Upanishads.' (from Complete Works, Vol. IX).

This vision explains the origin, nature, form, and utility of the Vedas. The Vedic hymns are the prayers to various divinities; they were realised by the rishis (sages) in the depths of their transcendental state; they are supposed to be handed down in a guru-shishya paramparā (teacher to student tradition); they are the rhythm of the national life of India; and spiritual eminence can come to a person only when he catches the rhythm signified by the Vedas.

What are the Vedas

The Vedas are the achievement, glory, power, strength and sustenance of the Hindu race.

Although most Hindus never see Vedic texts in their lifetime, yet, anyone who claims to be a Hindu, has to bow down in reverence to the Vedas, and has to

accept their supreme authority in matters individual, social, philosophical, religious, and spiritual. There is nothing in Hinduism that does not owe its origin and allegiance directly or indirectly to the Vedas.

The Vedas are full of all kinds of knowledge, and is the perfect guide for man in his quest for the four purusartha (goal of life) – Dharma (religious practices), Artha (material welfare), Kama (pleasure and happiness) and Moksha (Salvation). In sacred Hindu literature, the Vedas are considered the very manifestation of God, and the ultimate source of all wisdom and of all Dharma. It is for this reason that every Hindu's conduct, social carriage, religious ambition, and spiritual attainments have been shaped by the Vedas. These sacred texts are the foundation of the Hindu way of life, and also the technical support for its evolution.

There can be no doubt that without these great texts the Hindus would have continued to be savages, and in the long run they would have been annihilated by the marauding looters and the proselytising zealots. When the warrior caste of the Hindu race failed to save the country from the invaders, it was the Vedas that saved the race from internal dissipation; when the bulldozers of science started pulverising every religion into meek submission, it was the Vedas that made the Hindus stand in all majesty and with dignity -- unconquered, unscathed; and today, when materialism and its never satiating ally, consumerism, is sucking the globe of its vitality, it is the Vedas that make the Hindus laugh at the greedy and vain monster in derision.

No words can do justice to the Vedas' contribution to the world civilisation in general, and to the Hindus in particular.

The word veda is derived from the root vid, which has five different meanings (jnaane, labhe, vichaarane etc.), but of which "to know" is more popular. When used as common noun, the term may be used to mean the study of a particular science e.g., dhanurveda, ayurveda etc. As an adjective, it may be used to glorify a book, or a subject, e.g. Srimad Bhagavatam, which is respectfully called "the fifth Veda" by the Bhagavata devotees.

In its more popular sense, Vedas (with an 's') is used as proper noun to refer to the Samhitas (Vedic mantras) associated with the four Vedas (Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda). In a general sense, Vedas also means the Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads attached to these Samhitas. As a noun, the word first appears in the Rig Veda, where it means ritual lore.

The Vedas have other names like: Nigama, Shruti, Āmnāya, and trayee to express variously the outlook of various schools of thoughts. For example, Mimamsakas, the traditional Vedic schools, define Shruit as: Shruyate

dharma anayā iti (The injunctions of Dharma that are heard from the guru), and Āmnāya as: Āmnāyate upadishyate anen iti (That which gives instructions). Nigama is defined as the traditional wisdom transmitted from generation to generation, and Veda has been described by Shankaracharya as: Parmātmānām labhante iti (That through which one attains God).

Mimasakas, the traditionalists, limit the scope of the Vedas to instructions and injunctions concerning ritualistic sacrifices, and lay emphasis on the first two portions of the Vedas, The Mantra, and The Brahmana: "Mantrabrāhmanyoh vednam dheyam". According to them, the Upanishads and other texts that talk about Atman, or any such topic, are intended to encourage people towards Vedic sacrifices. As opposed to this view, Shankaracharya believes that the goal of all Vedic texts is to lead a person towards self realisation. According to him, Vedic sacrifices are meant for people who are not yet ready to give up selfish action, and who must wend their way up by first purifying their mind through action.

The Origin and Antiquity of the Vedas: Shruti

The Dating: Who wrote the Vedas? This is an oft-repeated question by the scholars, and the critics of the Vedas. Naturally. When most writers use the 'copy and paste' technique to see their name in print, it is natural for the world to wonder how someone could create such a great thing and not leave their name behind! Since our childhood, we have grown to see the name of the creator associated with the creation. But in India, the concept of the Creator is impersonal, and hence it has been the tendency of the great creators of art, poetry and music to remain anonymous. According to them, the personal degrades, whereas the impersonal elevates.

The Vedas, and their recorders are as impersonal as God Himself.

No single person, or a group of persons wrote the Vedas. As mentioned, the ancient rishis (sages) in the depths of their meditation and also in their transcendental state of mind came face to face with truths which they recorded as The Vedas. These truths were passed from the father to the son, or from the teacher to the disciple orally. Mostly these truths stayed with the families whose ancestors had discovered them. With time, more and more revelations were added to the existing mass, which made it difficult to manage the work through oral tradition. After some time, addition to the existing mass of knowledge was stopped, and every new finding was recorded in some other kind of work.

All this information comes to us from the tradition and writings of the ancient times. Indian scholars neither know, nor care to know the dates related to the Vedas: when they were composed, which section was composed earlier,

when their writing began, etc. The system of such dating began from the times of Max Muller, and continues with the Western scholars. Unfortunately, even for them it is a daunting task. Max Muller fixed the date of the first composition at 1500 BCE, which has now been greatly questioned. Interestingly, there has been a discovery in Asia Minor of the names of the Vedic deities Mitra, Varuna, and Indra, in an inscription of about 1400 BCE.

According to some Indian Vedic scholars like Tilak, who based their calculations on astronomical data, the Vedas were composed at least 8000 years ago. Swami Vivekananda agrees with Tilak, and says, "It was written, nobody knows at what date, it may be 8,000 years ago, in spite of all modern scholars may say, it may be 9,000 years ago."

One serious problem in fixing the date of the Vedas is the ludicrous Aryan invasion theory, according to which Aryans came to India around 2000 BCE, and destroyed the existing civilisation to settle down there. However, this theory and the dates related to it have been refuted by the modern scholars. Swami Vivekananda also debunked this theory strongly, and wrote:

'Whenever the Europeans find an opportunity, they exterminate the aborigines and settle down in ease and comfort on their lands; and therefore they think the Aryans must have done the same! The Westerners would be considered wretched vagabonds if they lived in their native homes depending wholly on their own internal resources, and so they have to run wildly about the world seeking how they can feed upon the fat of the land of others by spoliation and slaughter; and therefore they conclude the Aryans must have done the same! But where is your proof? Guess-work? Then keep your fanciful guesses to yourselves! In what Veda, in what Sukta, do you find that the Aryans came into India from a foreign country? Where do you get the idea that they slaughtered the wild aborigines? What do you gain by talking such nonsense? '

Another interesting reason for this problem of dating is the prejudices in the minds of the European scholars, who were all Christians. According to Christianity, the earth, the sun, the stars and everything was created in 4032 BCE (according to the Bible, and the year calculated by the great scientist Newton himself!). Naturally it was impossible for them to believe in a culture which went beyond the official date of the Lord's act.

For our studies, fixing the date of the Vedas is no issue at all. Suffice it to say that the Vedas were revealed to the sages, who passed on the wisdom to their disciples orally. Writing appeared in India around the 5th century BC in the form of the Brahmi script, but texts of the length of the Rig Veda were not written down until much later. Very few manuscripts (a maximum of 80) are available of this work, since most families carried the whole thing in their head. The oldest surviving manuscript dates to the 11th century.

Shruti: The sages took extraordinary precautions to preserve from loss or corruption the sacred text, which was being passed orally. The first step towards this was the formation of the Pada or 'word' text. In the Pada, all the words of the Samhita text are separated and given in their original form, before being shaped by the rules of Sandhi (conjunction). There are other rules too. The two methods of memorisation came to be known as: Samhitāpātha, which has all Sanskrit rules of sandhi applied and is the text used for recitation; and the Padapātha has each word isolated and is used for memorisation.

Padapātha was followed by other and more complicated methods of reciting the text, and by various works called Anukramanis or 'Indexes', which enumerate from the beginning to the end of the Rig Veda the number of stanzas contained in each hymn, the deities, and the metres of all the stanzas of the Rig Veda. It is due to these various precautions that the text of the Vedas have been handed down for thousands of years with a fidelity that finds no parallel in any other literature.

Since these were learnt by listening, these were called Shruti (heard). Other than the Vedas, every other literature which had spiritual connotation was termed Smriti. Throughout the history of India, Shrutis occupied the highest position in matters of respect and authority. In matters of chance conflict between the statements of the two, the words of the Shrutis were accepted as correct.

What is amazing about these works is that they were passed on from generation to generation for 8000 years or so, and were preserved in families all over India. When in the nineteenth century, Max Muller compiled the whole work for its first printing, the world was amazed to see that there was not a single alphabet's discrepancy between the manuscripts of any two families, though they lived separated by thousands of miles and had maintained them orally! This meant that even the most ancient manuscripts were no more authentic than what the Brahmins of the period were reciting from memory.

The world still wonders at the prodigious memory of the Brahmins who preserved a whole library of books in their head, generation after generation for thousands of years! This was the reason why the burning of libraries and the destruction of books in India by the invaders could not destroy the Vedas, and Hinduism was saved from annihilation.

Division of the Vedas

The tradition says that with the growing mass of Vedic literature, and the associated problem of keeping the whole thing in memory, it had become imperative to find ways and means of preserving the pure, and leaving out the

unimportant. So, Vyasa (c. 1500 B.C.E), the great authority that he was of his time, divided the Vedas into four and gave the responsibility of preserving them to four of his great disciples.

He compiled the Rig Veda by collecting the rik mantras, which are a kind of chant set to fixed melodies which are used as prayers during yajnas (sacrifices). This was taught to Paila

The Sāma Veda is a collection of Sāma songs (a particular metre, which can be sung) from Rig Veda. The arrangement of its verses is with reference to their place and use in the Soma sacrifice. This Veda was handed over to Jaimini.

The Yajur Veda is composed of yajus (prose mantras), which are used in sacrifices. Most of its verses are taken from the Rig Veda, but it also contains some original prose mantras which could be used as sacrificial prayers. However, even the Riks in Yajurveda are recited as if they were prose passages. This Veda was taught to Vaishampayana.

Later on, there was a quarrel between Vaishampayana and his prodigious disciple Yajnavalkya. Following the quarrel, Yajnavalkya left his guru and performed the tapasya of the Sun God, who taught him the Veda afresh. This version of Yajurveda is called Shukla Yajur Veda, or Vājasaneyi Samhitā (from Vāj, which means energy, or strength).

The Atharva Veda consists of a special class of Vedic texts known as chhanda, which are comprised of Riks (5/6) and Yajus (1/6). These mantras deal mostly with magic, spells, incantations, kingly duties, and also spiritual truths. Sumanta was taught this work.

There are lots of repetitions of the mantras in these Vedas. For example, 140 Rig Veda mantras are repeated in the Rig Veda itself, 1800 Rig Veda mantras are repeated in Samaveda, 230 Atharva Veda mantras have been repeated in the Atharva Veda, 1 Yajurveda mantra has been repeated in Samaveda, and so on.

The division of the Vedas and the arrangement of the hymns followed precise rules and was fully scientific. To take one small example, in mandala II to VII of the Rig Veda Samhita, the arrangements of the hymns is by gods, with Agni at the head, followed by Indra; and in Mandala IX the arrangement is by metres. Within any series, the arrangement of the hymns is in descending order of the number of verses. Thus various rules were applied to make the arrangements systematic.

The four basic Vedas gradually branched off into many recension, or śākhās which were maintained by various teachers. Slowly these recension came to be known by the name of these teachers. Thus the Satapatha Brahmana of the Shukla Yajur Veda survives in Kānva and Mādhyandina recension, according to the two disciples of Yajnavalkya. These versions differ greatly in content, the number of verses, and the arrangement of the sections and chapters; the former has seventeen, whereas the latter has fourteen sections. Interestingly, the concluding portion of both recension is the Brihadaranyaka Upanishada; but that too differs in the two shakhas. Shankaracharya's commentary on this Upanishad is based on the Kānva recension.

Trayee: The three Vedas: The term trayī, or triad, often used to denote the Vedas, is collectively applied to Rig, Sam, and Yajur. The Atharva is excluded from the triad because it has no application to sacrificial actions. This has made many Western scholars conclude wrongly that Atharva Veda is a later composition. What they miss is the fact that one of the four priests officiating in all Vedic sacrifices had to be from Atharva Veda tradition.

Categories of Vedic texts

Vedic texts are traditionally categorised into four classes: the Samhitās (Mantra), Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads. Certain Sutra literature like Shrautasutras and the Grhyasutras are also classified as "Vedic".

A collection of Mantras is called a Samhita. At times, it is often the Samhita portion alone which is referred to as the Veda. For instance, the word 'Rigveda' may mean the Rigveda Samhita.

The Brāhmanas are prose texts that discuss the sacrificial rituals as well as comment on their meaning and some other connected themes. Each of the Brahmanas is associated with one of the Samhitas or its recension. The Brahmanas may either form separate texts or can be partly integrated into the text of the Samhitas. They may also include the Aranyakas and Upanishads.

The Āranyakas, or "forest texts", are the concluding part of the Brahmanas that contain discussions on upasana, the meditation on sacrificial symbols. However, there is often no clear-cut distinction between the Brahmanas proper and the Aranyakas, or between the Aranyakas and the Upanishads. The Brahmana text proper often merges into the Aranyakas and many old Upanishads are actually embedded in the Aranyakas.

The Upanishads are the philosophical works of the Vedas. They discuss the nature of the soul and the world, and conclude that "Atman is Brahman". These works are now known as Vedanta ("the end of the Vedas") and are the basis of the all the Vedantic schools of thought which developed in later

times. For thousands of years now, the Upanishads have been the backbone of the Hindu religion.

Although the four sections (Samhita, Brahmanas, Aranyakas, Upanishads) of the Vedas follow each other in succession, there are exceptions to this. For example, in Rigveda, Samaveda, Shukla Yajurveda and the Atharvaveda, there is a clear-cut separation of the Mantra collection from the Brahmana portions, but in Krishna Yajurveda, the Mantra and the Brahmana portions are intermixed. Thus, the Taittiriya 'Samhita', belonging to the Krishna Yajurveda, has Mantras interspersed with Brahmana portions. Again, Taittiriya 'Brahmana' has both Mantras and Brahmana passages mixed with each other. Similarly, Isa Upanishad comes at the end of the Samhita itself instead of the Aranyaka. Some Upanishads come at the end of the Brahmana and some others are not distinctly separate from their respective Aranyaka. The list goes on.

Nevertheless, it is advisable to stick to this kind of division (which was advocated strongly by Max Muller) because it more or less follows the Indian tradition and conveys the historical sequence fairly accurately.

The Shrauta Sutras, regarded as belonging to the Smriti, are late Vedic in language and content. The composition of the Shrauta and Grhya Sutras marks the end of the Vedic period, and at the same time, the beginning of the Vedanga literature (the six auxiliary texts of the Vedas).

While production of Brahmanas and Aranyakas ceased with the end of the Vedic period, a large number of Upanishads were composed after the end of the Vedic period. But to make them authentic, the followers of these Upanishads claim them to be belonging to the lost portions of the Vedas.

It is believed by many scholars that the four kinds of Vedic texts: Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka and Upanishads were actually meant for people belonging to the four ashrama: Brahmacharya, Garhasthya, Vanaprastha, and Sannyasa respectively. Although the subject matters in the four divisions of the Vedas tend to overlap, the preponderance of prayer, rituals, contemplation, and knowledge respectively indicate that the view held by the scholars may be correct. However, there is no specific instruction regarding this.

Vedic Shakhas

The Vedic literature that has come down to us is attached to various traditional schools of recitation and ritual called the 'shakhas'. All the four Vedas have more than one shakha at present, but in the past, the number of shakhas studied was many times more. According to Patanjali, there were 21

shakhas of Rigveda, 9 of Atharvaveda, 101 of Yajurveda (86 of Krishna Yajurveda and 15 of Shukla Yajurveda, according to later authorities) and a 1000 varieties of chanting of Samaveda. Maybe, the number 1000 for the Samaveda merely refers to 'numerous'.

Two different Vedic shakhas might share one or more texts amongst themselves. Conversely, the distinction between two shakhas of the same Veda might result from the use of a different Samhita text, and/or a different Brahmana text, and/or different Kalpasutra text and so on. A group or a community of people who study a particular shakha in its entirety (Samhita + Brahmana + Aranyaka + Kalpasutra + any additional texts) and perform its ritual constitute a 'charana'.

The various shakhas of the Vedas were, at one time, spread throughout South Asia. Their geographical location has not been constant down the ages, as Brahmins of a particular shakha migrated from one part of India to the other, or adopted another shakha for some reason.

Language of the Vedas

Early Vedic language was a pitch accent language in which the same alphabet was used in three different ways -- svarita, udatta, anudatta; the higher on scale, the normal, and the lower. This helped the Vedic sages to adjust the rhythm and melody of the hymns, and were considered extremely important during pronunciation.

The kind of Sanskrit used in the Vedas became obsolete long ago. Even the words and expressions used there are now difficult to understand. The meaning of the major portion of the Rig Veda is clear, but some hymns and a great many of the single stanzas are still obscure or unintelligible. This was already the case in the time of Yaska, the author of the Nirukta (in which the Vedic grammar, etymology, and semantics are explained), the oldest available commentary (c. 700 B.C.) on about 600 detached stanzas of the Rig Veda.; for he quotes one of his predecessors, Kautsa, as saying that the Vedic hymns are obscure, difficult to understand, and mutually contradictory.

In the 13th century, the celebrated Vedic scholar Sayanacharya, wrote his famous commentaries on the Vedas. It is mainly with the help of these commentaries and the Nirukta that we are able to understand the contents of the Vedas.

Some basic facts about the Vedas

Vedas	Rig Veda	Krishna Yajur Veda	Sukla Yajur Veda	Sāma Veda	Atharva Veda
No. of original Recensions (shakha)	21	85	17	1000	50
Available Recensions or Shakas	Shakala, Bashkala	Taitirīya, Maitrayani, Katha, Kapisthala	Kanva, Madhyandina (Vajasanya)	Kauthuma, Ranayaniya, Jaiminiya, or Talavakara	Pippalada Shaunaka
Taught to sages:	Paila	Vaishampayana	Vaishampayana	Jaimini	Sumanta
Number of Verses in Samhita	10,552	1975	1975	1875	5977 in Shaunakiya
Brahmanas	Aitaraya, Kaushitaki or Shankhyayana	Taittirīya, Kāthaka	Sathapatha (two recensions)	Vamsa, Jaiminiya, Tandya/ Panchavimsa, Chhandogya, Sāmavidhana, Sadvimsa, Samhitopanishad, Devatadhyana	Gopatha
Aranyakas	Aitaraya, Kaushitaki or Sānkhyāyana	Taittirīya, Maitrāyani,	Brihadaranyaka (two recensions)	Chhandogya, Jaiminiya	
Upanishads	Aitaraya, Kaushitiki, Bhashkala	Mahanarayana, Maitrāyani, Katakha, Swetaswetara, Taitirīya	Isavasya, Brihadaranyaka	Chandogya, Kena	Prasna, Mundaka, Mandukya
Shrouta Sutras	Aswalayana, Shankhyayana	Apasthamba, Baudhayana, Hiranyakesi, Bharadwaja, Vaikhanasa, Vadhoola, Manava, Varaha	Katyayana (Paraskara)	Khadira, Latyayana, Drahyayana, Jaiminiya	Vikhanasa
Grihya Sutras	Ashwalayana, Sankyayana	Manava, Apasthamba, Baudhayana, Hiranyakesi, Vaikhanasa, Katha	Kaatyayana (Paaraskara)	Khadira, Gobhila, Gautama, Jaiminiya	Kaushika
Dharma Sutras	Vasishtha	Apasthamba Baudhayana, Hiranyakesi	Shankkhalikita	Gautama	Pathinasi
Upaveda	Ayurveda	Dhanurveda	Dhanurveda	Gandharvaveda	ArthaSastra
Priests	Hotri	Adhvaryu	Adhvaryu	Udgatri	Brahma
Priest's job during Yajna	Invoking the gods through hymns	Performing the sacrifice	Performing the sacrifice	Singing the Sāmagāna	Overall supervision

Secular Matters in the Vedas

Secular hymns: Scholars believe that less than 20 hymns of the Rig Veda are secular in character. These have a special value since they throw some light on the earliest thought and civilisation of India. They talk of wedding, funeral rites, and one of them [R. X. 34] is the lamentations of a gambler who, unable to resist the fascination of the dice, deplores the ruin to which he has brought on his family.

However, traditionalists do not accept that there is anything secular in the Vedas; everything is subjected to religious norms, sometimes openly, sometimes in a couched language. For example, the hymn related to the lamentations of the gambler is actually a mantra used for driving away the evil spirit that causes the tendency to gamble. Similarly the hymns to the frog (VII.103) are used for getting rains when they fail to come on time.

Mythological dialogues: Besides several mythological dialogues in which the speakers are divine beings, there are two in which both agents are human. One is a somewhat obscure colloquy (R. X. 95) between the mortal Puraravas and the apsara Urvasi, who is on the point of forsaking him. The other one (R. X. 10) is the dialogue between Yama and Yami, the twin parents of the human race. This group of hymns has a special literary interest as the forerunner of the dramatic works of a later age.

Riddles: Two hymns of the Vedas consist of riddles. One of these (R. VIII. 29) describes various gods without mentioning their names.

There is an elaborate and obscure poem of fifty-two stanzas (R.I.164), in which a number of riddles, largely connected with the sun are propounded in mystical and symbolic language.

Geographical data: From the geographical names mentioned in the Rig Veda., it has been inferred that when the hymns were composed, the sages occupied the territory corresponding to Punjab of to-day. The interesting mention in the Vedas is of the river Saraswati, now extinct. Scholars were concluding many things from the misrepresentation of the fact, but recent developments have proved the existence of that river.

Historical data: According to some scholars, many hymns apparently show that the Indo-Aryans (the early race of the Vedic sages) were engaged in war with the local aborigines, and many victories over these foes have been mentioned. The conquered ones were called 'dasa', which also meant, 'of the dark colour. But, this theory is now disputed. 'Dasa' may mean anyone with evil tendencies (and were considered non-sacrificers and non-believers of law, and morality), and victory over them may mean the victory of the good over the bad.

Society: Incidental references scattered throughout the hymns supply a good deal of information about the social conditions of the time. The family, with the father at its head, was the basis of society, and women held a freer and more honoured position than in later times. Many women were sages, and contributed in the composition of the hymns.

Rig Veda (X.18.8) and Atharva Veda have hymns which talk of the wooing by a young man of the just widowed lady for remarriage. Also in Atharva Veda (9.5.27) there is a clear mention of widow remarriage.

Occupation: The caste system had already started growing in India, but had not yet become as rigid as it became later on. So, the distribution of occupations to people belonging to various guilds was already in practice. Also, the need to pass on the Samhita to a worthy disciple, necessitated the crystallisation of the caste system.

Characteristics of the Vedas

Veda is knowledge in entirety: There can be no end to knowledge since it is as infinite as God Himself, and is one with Him. This has been pointed out beautifully in the Bible, 'In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God' (John 1:1). Such being the nature of knowledge, it is ever present, and everywhere; since God is also ever present and is present everywhere. Depending on the state of one's mind, one can reach the various levels of the Eternal Knowledge, which we call art, science, philosophy, poetry, spiritual truths etc. However, the major portion of the sum total of knowledge has to remain unexplored because of the limitations of the mind.

Veda is the sum total of all knowledge: discovered and undiscovered, and The Vedas (the books) are the records of the truths discovered by the human mind. Thus in a general sense, Vedas are the orthodox religious and philosophical wisdom of India, and in its particular sense, these are the books in which the earliest wisdom is preserved. In this writing, the term Veda has been used to mean Knowledge, and the Vedas, to mean the entire Samhita, Brahman, Aranyaka, and the Upanishads.

Vedas are impersonal and eternal: For the Hindus, Vedas are eternal, without beginning and without human authorship. The reason is simple. Creation means appearance of objects. Each object has a name or word for it, and each word has for its counterpart an object. The object denoted by a word is not individual in nature, but is generic. For example, the word "cow" is generic, and it does not depend on the birth or death of any particular cow.

The universe and its objects have both name and form as the essential condition for their manifestation. The thought wave in us, or in God, first manifests as a word and only then it manifests as the more concrete form, the object. In every created thing, the idea is the essence, whereas the form is only the external shell, and the name acts as the intermediary. It is in this sense that the universe is said to be created/manifested from the Vedic words.

Objects being eternal (during creation), and the relationship between word and object being eternal, Vedas and Vedic words are eternal. When dissolution takes place, Vedas are merged with God. It is like the idea of "pot" staying merged with the potter, when there is no "pot" around.

Unlike the works of, say a great poet, Vedas are impersonal. It is wrong to think that Vedas are the works of sages. The rishis only discovered them. By means of good deeds (the priests) attained the capacity to understand the Vedas; (then) they found them dwelling in the Rishis (RV 10.71.3).

Vedas have also been described as the inner life of man, and hence eternal. Making it more clear, Patanjali, the author of Yoga Sutras, says that the words of the Vedas are not eternal, but it is the knowledge (ideas) conveyed through them that is. In Sanskrit, the eternal Knowledge is also known as Sphota, and so the Vedas are also known as Shabda Brahman, i.e, God as word. It is because of this that the work is treated with the greatest reverence by the Hindus. In many Indian temples, they are even worshipped as a deity.

The Vedas command so much respect that every Hindu philosopher has to show that whatever they have to say, is in consonance with the Vedas. This is known as Shruti Praman. The systems of philosophy that refuses to accept the Vedas as the ultimate authority, are called nastika darshana (lit. atheistic philosophy).

Vedas are the oldest literature of the world: The oldest trace of literary sources from the ancient Greek world is the works of Homer (c. 700 BCE). From the Middle East, the oldest books are the Hebrew Bible. Parts of the Old Testament are much older, but they took shape only around 500 BCE. The Gathas of Zoroaster are also old (525 BCE), but they appeared later than the Vedas. The oldest book from the Chinese tradition is the I Ching whose core portions are believed to be of 1000 BCE or so.

Thus Samhitas (according to Max Muller, 1500 BCE), the collections of Vedic hymns, are the oldest literature of the world. It has been conclusively proved that no book, or literature as we understand the terms, was written anywhere near the period that these Samhitas were recorded. They are the earliest records of the aspirations of human minds, the questions that arose, and the possible answers that they comprehended to those great riddles.

Vedas are vast: It is believed that the total content of the Vedas was so vast that the Samhitas (texts) alone were enough to fill up a room. Patanjali mentions that the Sama Veda had one thousand branches, but they are all lost, and we are left with only three branches. Similar loss has occurred with each of the Vedas; the major portion of them has disappeared, and we have been left with only minor portion. As we shall see, the various portions were under the care of particular families; each branch put into the head of certain priests and kept alive by memory and when these families died out, or were killed under foreign persecution, or somehow became extinct; these portions were lost forever.

The whole corpus of Vedic mantras (only the Samhita) have around 20,400 hymns which run in around 90,000 padas (lines). This does not include the mantra, aranyak, and the upanishad portions of the Vedas. Compared to this, The Mahabharata, considered to be the largest work, has 1,00,000 shlokas (mostly of 2 lines each).

The Two approaches: The approach to the study of the Vedas is twofold: the Western, and the traditional Indian. F. Max Muller, the great Indologist, initiated a deep interest in the Western minds towards the Vedas. His contribution in the various fields of study of the Vedas has been simply immense, but his approach is constrained. Even Swami Vivekananda, who had met Max Muller, and admired him a lot, was not willing to accept everything that he had said about the Vedas, their date, or their interpretation.

The traditional Indian approach, on the other hand, has a rich heritage, and has an unbroken tradition of thousands of years which continues even now. Swami Vivekananda, despite his modern outlook, always held the orthodox Indian view when it came to the Vedas.

In this article, the approach is traditional. Whenever needed, help has been taken from the Western sources, but in case of any conflicting view, the traditional approach has been retained.

Religion in the Vedas

The Vedas are the first attempt in recorded history of mankind to express the Divine in words. So these sacred books present before us the various layers of understanding of spiritual matters. No wonder that these layers appear to many as confusing, and to some others as contradictory. But in reality these ideas are complimentary, and are more like stepping stones to the highest truth.

Vedas are about Nature worship, and not about ancestor worship: Scholars all over the world believe that religion began with the practice of ancestor worship. But this cannot be accepted as true in the case of the Vedas.

The Vedic religion began with nature worship, as we have seen earlier. Swami Vivekananda says, 'The human mind seems to struggle to get a peep behind the scenes. The dawn, the evening, the hurricane, the stupendous and gigantic forces of nature, its beauties, these have exercised the human mind, and it aspires to go beyond, to understand something about them. In the struggle they endow these phenomena with personal attributes, giving them souls and bodies, sometimes beautiful, sometimes transcendent. Every attempt ends by these phenomena becoming abstractions whether personalised or not.'

The gods and their life: The gods of the Vedas are largely personifications of the powers of nature. The hymns are mainly invocations of these gods, and are meant to accompany the offering that is made in the fire during a yajna. In the Rigveda, it is stated that there are 33 gods divided into three groups of eleven, distributed in earth, air, and heaven. Many other deities, such as the Maruts, are not included in this number. The gods were believed to have had a beginning, but were not projected as having come into being at the same time. Rigveda occasionally refers to earlier gods; and certain deities are described as the offspring of others.

The gods were conceived of as human in appearance. Their bodily parts are figurative illustrations of the phenomena of nature represented by them. For example, the arms of the Sun are his rays; and the tongue and limbs of Agni are the flames of fire. Some of the gods appear as warriors, especially Indra, while others like Agni and Brihaspati are priests. All of them drive through the air in cars, drawn chiefly by steeds, but sometimes by other animals. The favourite food of men is also that of the gods, which include non-vegetarian items. These are offered to them in the sacrifice, which is either conveyed to them in heaven by the god of fire, or they come physically to join the sacrifice. Their favourite drink is Soma rasa, the exhilarating juice of the Soma plant. The home of the gods is heaven, where cheered by draughts of Soma, they live a life of bliss.

Attributes of the gods: Being great and mighty, their most prominent attribute is power. They regulate the order of nature and also defeat creatures with evil tendencies (like asuras). They hold sway over all creatures; no one can thwart their ordinances or live beyond the time they appoint, and the fulfilment of desires of human beings is dependent on them. They are benevolent beings who bestow prosperity on mankind. They are described as 'true' and 'not deceitful', being friends and protectors of the honest and righteous, but punishing sin and guilt.

These gods have many features common in them, such as power, brilliance, benevolence, and wisdom. This identification was further increased by the practice of invoking deities in pairs (mentioned later)-- a practice that made many gods share a lot of common characteristics.

Classification of gods: The Vedic gods may be classified as deities of heaven, air, and earth. The celestial gods are Dyaus, Varuna, Mitra, Surya, Savitr, Pusan, the Asvins, and the goddesses Usas, and Ratri. The atmospheric gods are Indra, Rudra, the Maruts, Vayu, Parjanya, and the Waters. The terrestrial deities are Prthivi, Agni, and Soma. There are also certain rivers that are personified and invoked in the Rigveda, the most important of them is Saraswati.

The nature and character of the gods will be discussed in a latter section.

Abstract deities: One can clearly see the flow of worship from the concrete to the abstract, which also gave rise to abstract deities. For example, 'Dhatri' was an attribute of Indra, but later on became itself a deity who was responsible for the creation of the earth, sun and moon.

There are a few other abstract deities whose names were originally epithets of older gods, but later became epithets of the supreme God. For example, the epithet Visvakarman, 'all-creating', appears as the name of an independent deity. The concept of a Supreme God, as we understand it now, evolved a little later.

The second and smaller class of abstract deities are those who are the personification of abstract nouns. In this class are the Manyu, 'Wrath'; Sraddha, 'Faith'; Anumati, 'Favour (of the gods)', Nirrti, 'Disease', and others.

A purely abstract deity is Aditi, whose main characteristic is the power of delivering from the bonds of physical suffering and moral guilt. It was much later that she was personified as the mother of the small group of deities called Adityas, 'sons of Aditi'.

Goddesses: Only a few goddesses are mentioned in the Vedas, of whom, Usas and Sarasvati are the famous ones. Sarasvati is celebrated in two whole hymns (R. VI. 61, and R. VII. 95) as well as parts of others. There are others like Vac, 'Speech' (R.X. 71. 125), Prthivi, 'Earth', and Ratri, 'Night'. The wives of the great gods are insignificant, being mere names formed from those of their consorts, and altogether lacking in individuality.

Dual Divinities: A novel feature of the religion of the Rigveda is the invocation of pairs of deities whose names are combined as compounds. About two dozen such pairs are mentioned. The most famous of these pairs are Mitra-Varuna, and Dyava-prthivi.

Groups of Deities: There are also groups of gods like the Maruts (wind gods) who attend on Indra. The smaller group of the Adityas, of whom Varuna is the chief, is constantly mentioned in company with their mother Aditi. Their

number is stated to be seven or, with the addition of Martanda, eight. A much less important group, without individual names or definite number, is that of the Vasus, whose leader is generally Indra.

Lesser Divinities: Besides the higher gods, there are a number of lesser divine powers, of which the most prominent are the Ribhus. They are three divinities with marvellous skills, which made them divine. There is also the mention of an apsara (celestial dancer), and a gandharva (celestial musician). In later literature, these two celestial beings became more numerous. There are also a few divinities who are guardians watching over the welfare of the homes and fields of human beings. For example, Sita, the 'Furrow', is invoked to give rich crops and blessings.

We also find the rivers, waters, and the mountains praised as divinities. Also deified are the sacrificial implements like mortar, pestle, sacrificial post etc.

The Demons: They are often mentioned of as two kinds. The higher and more powerful class are the aerial foes of the gods, called the asuras. Danu was the mother of these asuras, so they are also called dānava.

The second or lower class of demons are the terrestrial ones who are the enemies of men. Their generic name is Rakshasas. Another class of demons scarcely referred to in the Rigveda, but often mentioned in other Vedas, are the Pisachas, eaters of raw flesh and corpses.

The Pitris: The term fathers (pitris) in the Veda means the first ancestors, but the term is also used to generally mean the totality of the dead, whose last rites have been performed according to the Vedic injunctions. These pitris are immortal, equal to gods, their comrade-in-arms, and desirous of offerings by their descendent. Mantras used for making food offerings to them end with svadhā, whereas the offerings made to the gods, end with svāhā.

However, these pitris are the antithesis of gods, for, a person who gets attracted to pitriloka, cannot proceed further in his spiritual journey. This idea was first mentioned in the Brahmanas and was further developed in later literature. It is for this reason that eating of shrāddha food is discouraged for spiritual aspirants.

Rituals: When gods have appeared in a religion, can rituals be far behind? Once the Vedic sages came up with the concept of gods, the practice of making offerings to them became more and more pervasive. Soon there were rituals for the various hours of the day, for different special days, seasons, occasions and purpose. The Samhita and the Brahmana literature are mostly about these yajna.

The aspects of these rites and sacrifices will be discussed in a later section. Here we only mention that these sacrifices were of two types: domestic, grihya, and public, shrauta. The former did not require the presence of priests, whereas the latter required them.

Do's and don'ts: Being a guide to the path of pravritti (religion characterised by action), the Vedas discuss vidhi (injunctions) and nisedha (prohibitions) in the form of rituals, and a few codes of individual conduct. These were further classified as Nitya (daily rituals), naimittika (rituals performed on special occasions), kāmya (rituals related to some desired goal), prāyaschitta (penances), and nisiddha (prohibited actions).

The code givers of later times made a thorough job of this aspect of the Vedas, and tied the Hindu race in the rigours of rituals. This class of literature came to be known as Smritis.

Morality: The term in the Vedas for the cosmic moral laws, ritual, and order -- all in one-- is rtam, which is higher even to the gods.

Vrata (religious observances) are performed in accordance with rtam; dharma is the ritual support of vrata; shraddhā is the power that allows one to perform vrata; and tapas is that which is released from the body due to the efforts made during ascetic effort (during vrata, or other religious rites).

Atman: There can be no religious life unless one accepts the continuation of life in some form after death. One can be moral without this idea, but cannot be religious.

The whole of Vedic literature and the later scriptures of Indian origin accepted the presence of something permanent behind the impermanent body. This was called jiva (the soul). Why else would one worry about making sacrifices and leading a moral life?

With time, the idea of the self, transmigrating through heaven and hell, was perfected. But the sages soon realised that this was a naive concept. Finally the Upanishadic sages came up with the remarkable solution to the great riddle of existence. They proclaimed: Atman is Brahman -- the Individual is one with the Universal. This unique concept of Atman (different from jiva) differentiates Hinduism from all other religions. A thorough discussion on the nature of Atman can be found in the Upanishad section.

Karma and Rebirth: The concept of rebirth came pretty early on in the Vedas, but the term signifying samsāra and total migration was coined in the Katha Upanishad (Atharva Veda) only. The idea was the logical fall out of the law of cycle, according to which, a thing that has happened once, will happen again.

Later on, this doctrine was to become the most powerful and profound pillar of Hindu philosophy.

Heaven and hell: The early ideas of the dead in the Rig Veda were that they went by "the path that their fathers had taken" and reached heaven, where they were awaited by pleasure, idleness and enjoyment. Those who practised asceticism, performed sacrifices, gave gifts, cultivated rtam (universal moral order), and studied the Vedas reached these sukrita loka (heaven).

The idea of hell developed later and gradually. The place was reserved for the enemies of the Vedas, impious, and greedy.

However, by the Upanishadic times, it was universally accepted that both these abodes of the dead were only temporary places of residence. After the exhaustion of its karma, the soul returned back to earth to continue with its journey towards liberation, mukti.

Mukti: The concept of mukti is the culmination of the great spiritual truth: Atman is Brahman. In the state of mukti, one transcends the states of duality like pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, birth and death etc. and experiences unalloyed, and infinite joy.

The sages also realised that the mukti (liberation) of a soul was not possible through any sacrifice, asceticism, moral observance, or any other action; it could be achieved only through the knowledge of the Self.

Philosophy of the Vedas

The discussions in the Vedas on a great many topics are so vast that it is impossible to organise them in a single work; and, even a whole life devoted to its study would be too short to fully understand and comprehend any aspect of the Vedas. The same is true of its philosophy-- they are vast, obscure, and very difficult to organise.

Creation: In the Vedas we come across various theories of creation, most popular of which are found in Purusa Sukta and Nasadiya Sukta. Whatever the theory, they all agree in the periodic nature of creation and dissolution.

In Purusa Sukta, creation is described as having come from God, the Lord, whose external form is one-fourth of the whole manifest universe.

The theory of creation in Nasadiya Sukta is more impersonal, according to which the creative power existed without vibration (Ānidavātam) after the dissolution of the previous cycle (kalpa). In that state, there is a kind of equilibrium, which is characterised by absence of any kind of motion. When the process of creation is about to begin, there appears mysteriously the power that disturbs this equilibrium, and the creative process begins.

The later philosophers and poets took up both these concepts to develop and consolidate their system of thought, the most famous of which are Samkhya, and the Bhagavata dhrama (detailed in the Puranas). The whole of Indian philosophy (excepting those who do not believe in any creation at all), accepts one of these two models and modifies them to suit its needs.

Vedic hymns are god-centred: Vedic hymns, as mentioned earlier, are mostly in praise of god, their life stories, mythologies connected with them, and the method by which oblations can be offered to them. In between these, one does get a peep at the higher philosophy of life. These occasional utterings were later developed fully in the Upanishads.

The idea of Infinity: Unlike the mythologies of other religions, the Vedas treat their gods as expressions of the Infinite. For example, Indra is described as having a body, and is also described as being omnipresent and omnipotent. Most of these gods are treated as beings in whom the whole universe exists, who can read every mind, and who are also the ruler of the universe.

It was through this idea of infinity that the sages came up with the idea of Ekam Sat Vipra Bahudha Vadanti--That which exists is One; sages call It by various names. To the sages, the Being perceived was one and the same, but the perceiver was different. And, that is how they sang out:

They call him Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni,
And there is the Divine nobly winged Garutmān
To what is One, sages give many a name
And call It Agni, Yama, Matarisvān. (Rigveda. I. 164-46)

Beginning of Monotheism without the ideas of fear and sin: Monotheism (the doctrine of one God), came very early in the Vedas, but not in the form that the Semitic religions believe. As mentioned earlier, the gods were taken up one by one and made into the Supreme God. In the case of Varuna, the sages even came up with the idea of sin and fear (the essential component of all monotheistic religions), but these ideas were soon given up as demeaning. Later, the sages were to give up the very idea of monotheism itself, realising that it was too inadequate to explain the world.

The answer to mysteries lies within: The Vedas teach both pravritti (prohibitions and injunctions in the life of a householder), and Nivritii (giving up of all worldly enjoyments) as twin spiritual ideals.

The sages realised that by nature the senses are limited, and are capable of getting only the external sense data. This meant that they were not in a position to grasp the supreme self, which is infinite, and behind the world of phenomena. That was when the sages declared that all philosophical search for spirituality had to be internal and not external.

The reality of the external world is obvious to every human being. This obvious presence of the external world logically suggests the presence of a Creator God. However, the presence of this kind of God always poses serious logical fallacies, and instead of remaining infinite, He is reduced to being finite. It is at this point that true spirituality is born. True spirituality preaches that God is beyond and untouched by Creation, and search for Him must be made within one's own heart.

Vedas culminated into Vedanta: The sages reached those heights of philosophy where even the most daring would be frightened. How?

The Vedas were never monotheistic. So in the ultimate analysis, the sages realised that 'behind the unreal, God alone was Real'. This meant that everything other than God, was unreal. Even the rituals, scriptures, and injunctions were equally unreal when it came to the ultimate realisation. So, in the last leg of the spiritual journey, a person had to give up even those supports with the help of which he had made his spiritual journey so far. At that final stage, he had to depend only on his purified mind for the realisation of his self. The Vedas declare, 'tatra ved aveda bhavati' – in that state the Vedas become aveda, of no significance. This indeed is the ultimate in boldness for any spiritual seeker, for, no Christian, or a Muslim can ever think of outgrowing his scripture.

This inward turning gave birth to real philosophy, which came to be known as Vedanta. Swami Vivekananda says, 'And they found out step by step that that which is external is but a dull reflection at best of that which is inside. ... He is not a God outside, but He is inside; and they took Him from there into their own hearts. Here He is, in the heart of man, the Soul of our souls, the Reality in us.'

Post Vedic Influence

Philosophy: Philosophies and sects that developed in the Indian subcontinent have taken differing positions on the Vedas. Schools of Indian philosophy which cite the Vedas as their authority are classified as āstika, "orthodox". The other one is nāstika, "heterodox" or "non-Vedic" schools, which comprise of Chārvāka (materialism), Buddhism and Jainism. So, a philosophy can be called "Hindu" only if it accepts the authority of the Vedas as supreme.

Religion: The Vedas contain all the four essential pillars of religion: ritual, mythology, philosophy, and conduct. But they were not fully evolved. It was for the sages of later period to develop each of these four aspects separately as. Rituals were taken up by Tantra, mythology was taken up by the Puranas, philosophy evolved into Upanishads, and code of conduct evolved into Smritis.

Poetry: The Vedic poetry evolved into The Ramayana, and The Mahabharata, which also came to be known as epics. Vedic poetry had a tremendous impact on the Indian psyche, and it influenced nearly every poet of later times.

Society: The society of the Vedic period had started organising itself in varna and ashrama (the caste, and the four stages). Although these were not as rigid as they were in later times, they were also not as fluid as one might suppose. The norms that were set by the Vedic sages, and the practises that were advocated by them, continue to be in vogue even today. Only necessary additions and corrections, considered useful for the contemporary society, have been made over the years.

Contents of the Vedas

Rig Veda

The hymns of the Rig Veda are considered the oldest and most important of the Vedas. Atharva Veda and Yajurveda draw heavily from it, and nearly the whole of Samaveda is a collection of hymns from this sacred book.

The Rig Veda has 1028 hymns (suktas) divided into ten mandalas (books). The shortest sukta (hymn) has 1 verse, whereas the longest has 58 verses. The total number of verses in it is 10,462. Each sukta consists of a number of verses, which are called richā. Here it may be mentioned that the verses of the Vedas are in general called mantra (as opposed to shloka, of other works), and also have specific names like rik, or, richā .

The hymns addressed to various divinities vary in frequency. The maximum number of hymns, 250, are addressed to Indra, followed by Agni with 200. These hymns were used, and are still used as prayers during a sacrifice (yajna). The priest who recited these verses was known as hotr.

The samhita is preserved in two shakha (recension): Śākala and Bāskala, which are practically identical. The slight difference is in the Brāhmana associated with them. However, it is the Sakala tradition (Shakalya was the sage) which survived the ravages of time, and reached us.

The division of the Vedas and the arrangement of the hymns follow precise rules. In mandala II to VII, hymns to Agni comes in the beginning, and is then followed by those to Indra. The hymns contained in each of these mandalas were composed by the poets of same family, and were handed down from generation to generation. The poets in the order of books are: Gritsamada, Vishwamitra, Vamadeva, Atri, Bharadwaja, and Vasistha.

Within any series, the arrangement of the hymns is in descending order of the number of verses. When several hymns have the same number of verses, they are arranged in descending order of the length of the metre, and so forth.

This precise arrangement of verses is a proof that Vyasa (or someone like him) must have organised the whole thing systematically much after they were composed.

Book I, and VIII are of mixed nature, but have similarity in the arrangement of the hymns.

Book IX is distinguished from the rest of the Rig Veda in the sense that all its hymns are addressed to one and the same deity, Soma, (the other books do not contain a single Soma hymn). Also, its grouping is based not on authorship, but on metres used. Many scholars believe that Book IX was deliberately taken out of other books, so that it could be used easily for Soma sacrifice.

The Xth book has the same number of verses as the 1st book, and was handled by the sages of different families. In contrast, each one of books II – VII was handled by a particular family. In spite of this book's generally more modern character, it contains hymns quite as old and poetic as the average of those in other books. The grammatical forms and words are quite obsolete, and yet new words and meanings seem to be emerging from them. All these factors combine to confuse the scholars regarding its possible date of composition, and also about its correct place in the series of the ten books.

Content of Rig Veda: The chief gods of the Rig Veda are Indra, a heroic god who is praised for having slain his enemy Vrtra; Agni, the sacrificial fire; and Soma, the sacred potion. Other prominent gods are Mitra-Varuna and Ushas (the dawn). Also invoked are Savitr, Vishnu, Rudra, Pushan, Brihaspati, Brahmanaspati, as well as deified natural phenomena such as Dyaus Pita (the sky), Prithivi (the earth), Surya (the sun), Vayu (the wind), Apas (the waters), Parjanya (the rain), Vac (the word), many rivers (notably the Sapta Sindhu, and the Sarasvati River). Groups of deities are the Ashvins, the Maruts, the Adityas, the Ribhus, the Vishvadevas. It contains many other minor gods, persons, concepts, phenomena and items, and sketchy references to historical events.

According to the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, the number of syllables in the Rig Veda is 432,000, equalling the number of muhurtas in forty years (30 muhurtas make 1 day). Interestingly, that is also the number of years that one kalpa (the life span of Brahma, the Creator) has, i.e., 4,320,000,000 years.

This stresses the underlying philosophy of the Vedic books that there is a strong connection between the astronomical, the physiological, and the spiritual.

Sāma Veda

In sanctity, the Sāma Veda ranks next to the Rig Veda. Its Samhita consists of hymns, portions of hymns, and detached verses, taken mostly from the Rig Veda. These were transposed and re-arranged to suit the religious ceremonies in which they were to be employed. Of the 1875 hymns that it contains, most are from the eighth and ninth mandala of the Rig Veda, and were sung by the Udgatri priests during the Soma sacrifices.

The animal sacrifices did not use Sāma chants, but these chants were extensively used in agricultural rites and in soma rituals. The hymns are addressed to Indra, Agni, and Soma.

The Sāmaveda is considered to be the origin of Indian music. Its melodies use the seven svaras or notes. Unfortunately the melodies belonging to the samhita age have not been preserved, and what we have now is only gāna of late origin.

In these compiled hymns of the Samaveda, there are frequent variations from the text of the Rig Veda. While singing, the verses are altered further by prolongation, repetition, insertion of syllables, various modulations, rests, and other modifications.

Yajur Veda

The tradition says: *rgvih stuvanti, yajurbhhih yajanti* -- rik mantras are for prayer, and Yajus are for oblation. Consequently the samhitā of this Veda contains mantras which are used in yajna. However, most of these mantras are a collection from Rigveda.

There are two versions of the samhitās of the Yajurveda: Shukla (white) and Krishna (black). Both contain verses necessary for rituals, but Krishna Yajurveda includes the Brahmana prose commentary within the samhita, while the Shukla Yajurveda contains the Brahmana as separate texts. However, both contain the same number of verses, 1975. Also, the priest associated with both of them is known as Adhvaryu. The job of these priest is to pour oblation in the sacrificial fire during a yajna.

Shukla Yajurveda: There are two (nearly identical) shakhas of the Shukla Yajurveda: Madhyandiniya, and Kanva. Both are known as Vajasaneyi Samhita. The former is popular in North India, whereas the latter is more

popular in the South. It has forty adhyaya (sections), and it contains the hymns used in various yajnas like, New and Full Moon sacrifices, Agnihotra , Soma yajna , Vajapeya and Rajasuya (two variants of the Soma sacrifice), construction of yajnavedi, the altars and hearths, Sautramani (it was originally a ritual to counteract the effects of excessive Soma-drinking), Ashvamedha, Purushamedha, Sarvamedha, Pitriyajna, and Pravargya.

The last, 40th chapter, is Isa Upanishad, which is an exception to the character of the work.

Krishna Yajurveda: There are four recension of the Krishna ("black" or "dark") Yajurveda: Taittiriya samhita, Maitrayani samhita, Kathaka samhita, and Kapisthala katha samhita. Each of these recension has a Brahmana associated with it, and some of them also have Aranyakas, Upanishads Shrautasutras, and Grihyasutras.

The best known of these recensions is the Taittiriya, which consists of seven books or kandas, divided in chapters or prapathaka. These are further subdivided into individual hymns. Some of these mantras have gained particular eminence in Hinduism. The most important of these mantras is the Gaytri mantra. Viswamitra is credited as the seer of this most famous mantra of Hinduism.

Atharva Veda

With its 5987 hymns collected in 20 kandas and 731 sections, the Atharva Veda is much longer than the Sama and Yajur, and is nearly half the size of Rig Veda.

Unlike the other Vedas, it contains a lot of prose, which are all original composition. However, most of its poetic hymns come from the Rig Veda (about one-seventh of the whole Atharva Veda). This Veda comes in two shakha: Shaunaka and Pippalada.

During a sacrifice, the priest belonging to Atharva Veda is known as Brahma. His duty is to ensure perfection in the yajna, and also to check the correctness of the chanting of the hymns. It was the normal practise of Brahma to collect half of the offerings made during the sacrifice.

The mantras of Atharva Veda were not directly used in any sacrifice, so the other three Vedas came to be known as trayee. Due to this many scholars (European) wrongly concluded that Atharva Veda was a later creation. The fact is that the hymns of this Veda belong to a particular class of metre, called chhanda, and are used primarily as magical spells and incantations. Considering the strong orthodox nature of the Brahmins (who would have

never allowed a supervisor from an inferior background, and who also took away half of the total offerings!), the overall content of Atharva Veda, it is naive to conclude that Atharva Veda was a later addition.

Some of the charms described in Atharva Veda are for fever, cough, jaundice, bodily pain, hereditary diseases, leprosy, worms in children, poison, snake bite, mania etc. They also contain charms to grow long hair, for a healthy life, prosperity, for getting a bride, for getting a son, killing one's enemy etc. The book also contains prayers of penances for various sins.

Interestingly, Atharva Veda has no Aranyaka attached to it.

Shabda Brahman: The Fountainhead of Creation

Hindus believe that the Vedas are apaurusheya, i.e., 'not created by any person'; sage or scholar. It is their belief that God Himself breathed out the Vedas before the creation of the universe. In turn, when Brahma began to create, He made use of Veda and started the new cycle of creation in the same order and style as it existed in the previous cycle.

The process of creation and its relation to the Vedas has been beautifully explained by Swami Vivekananda in his various speeches, dialogues and writings. Here is mentioned his exposition in brief.

'A word is Veda, if I can pronounce it rightly. Then it will immediately produce the [desired] effect. This mass of Vedas eternally exists and all the world is the manifestation of this mass of words. Then when the cycle ends, all this manifestation of energy becomes finer and finer, becomes only words, then thought. In the next cycle, first the thought changes into words and then out of those words [the whole universe] is produced. If there is something here that is not in the Vedas, that is your delusion. It does not exist.

'Veda means the sum total of eternal truths; the Vedic Rishis experienced those truths; they can be experienced only by seers of the supersensuous and not by common men like us. That is why in the Vedas the term Rishi means "the seer of the truth of the Mantras"....Veda is of the nature of Shabda or of idea. It is but the sum total of ideas. Shabda, according to the old Vedic meaning of the term, is the subtle idea, which reveals itself by taking the gross form later on. So owing to the dissolution of the creation the subtle seeds of the future creation become involved in the Veda. Accordingly, in the Puranas you find that during the first Divine Incarnation, the Minavatara, the Veda is first made manifest. The Vedas having been first revealed in this Incarnation, the other creative manifestations followed. Or in other words, all the created objects began to take concrete shape out of the Shabdas or ideas in the Veda. For in Shabda or idea, all gross objects have

their subtle forms. Creation had proceeded in the same way in all previous cycles or Kalpas. This you find in the Sandhya Mantra of the Vedas: " The Creator projected the sun, the moon, the earth, the atmosphere, the heaven, and the upper spheres in the same manner and process as in previous cycles."

'...Supposing this jug breaks into pieces; does the idea of a jug become null and void? No. Because, the jug is the gross effect, while the idea, "jug", is the subtle state of the Shabda-state of the jug. In the same way, the Shabda-state of every object is its subtle state, and the things we see, hear, touch, or perceive in any manner are the gross manifestations of entities in the subtle or Shabda state. Just as we may speak of the effect and its cause. Even when the whole creation is annihilated, the Shabda, as the consciousness of the universe or the subtle reality of all concrete things, exists in Brahman as the cause. At the point of creative manifestation, this sum total of causal entities vibrates into activity, as it were, and as being the sonant, material substance of it all, the eternal, primal sound of "Om" continues to come out of itself. And then from the causal totality comes out first the subtle image or Shabda-form of each particular thing and then its gross manifestation. Now that causal Shabda, or word-consciousness, is Brahman, and it is the Veda.

'... even if all the jugs in the universe were to be destroyed, the idea or Shabda, "jug", would still exist. So if the universe be destroyed--I mean if all the things making up the universe be smashed to atoms--why should not the ideas or Shabdas, representing all of them in consciousness, be still existing? And why cannot a second creation be supposed to come out of them in time?

'... nothing is produced if you or I cry out like that; but a jug must be revealed if the idea of it rises in Brahman which is perfect in Its creative determinations. When we see even those established in the practice of religion (Sadhakas) bring about by will-power things otherwise impossible to happen, what to speak of Brahman with perfect creativeness of will? At the point of creation Brahman becomes manifest as Shabda (Idea), and then assumes the form of "Nada" or "Om". At the next stage, the particular Shabdas or ideas, that variously existed in former cycles, such as Bhuh, Bhuvah, Svah, cow, man, etc., begin to come out of the "Om". As soon as these ideas appear in Brahman endowed with perfect will, the corresponding concrete things also appear, and gradually the diversified universe becomes manifest."

To highlight this power of the Vedic mantras to create anything, Valmiki in Ramayana (chapter 91), describes how Bharadwaja created quality food, dancing girls and other objects of enjoyment for the army of king Bharata when he was on his way to meet Sri Rama in exile.

The concept that ideas, words and the corresponding objects are related, is one of the essential pillars of Hinduism. This concept was later taken up by the Vaishnavas who proclaimed that the name and the named object are same. Sri Ramakrishna used to quite often mention this fact of God and His name being the same.

Creation according to two hymns of the Vedas

Purusha Suktam (RV X.90) and Nasadiya Suktam (RV X.129) describe the process of creation in two different ways. Purusha Suktam describes creation as having come out from, and by Purusha (God).

"The universes, past, present and future, are but manifestations of the Supreme Lord who expands Himself as the Purusa. He is the Lord of immortality but has manifest Himself as the Purusa in the universe so that the jivas may enjoy material fruits. '.

"The past, present and future universes are manifestations of the Lord's powers, but the Lord Himself is much greater. The material creation is but one quarter portion, and the eternal nature in the spiritual sky exists in three quarters portion.

"The three quarters portion of the Lord transcended the material portion. The Lord in the one quarter portion manifested the universe again, as He had done repeatedly before. The Lord of the one quarter portion began the work of creation, by going all around, taking the form of all animate and inanimate objects." (RV X.90.2-4)

This concept was taken up by the later philosophers to describe how God creates the universe.

Nasadiya Suktam begins with the concept of "pure existence" described as "in the beginning there was neither nothingness (i.e. creation did not come out of vacuum), nor was there any existence (i.e. there was nothing that could be known through senses or the mind)". The first step of creation was when "desire descended on it. That was the primal seed, born of the mind."

It was from this point that the subtle became gross, and then acted on itself. Thus Prana (the cosmic energy) hammered at Akasha (the finest first particles) to produce gross matter which ultimately to become the universe.

Swami Vivekananda loved this idea of creation so much that he translated the hymn into Sanskrit, and used its various concepts and imagery freely in his talks. One of the listeners of his talks was Mr Nicholas Tesla, who was a highly respected scientist and an electrical engineer of his time. Swamiji

wrote about him, 'Mr. Tesla was charmed to hear about the Vedantic Prana and Akasha and the Kalpas, which according to him are the only theories modern science can entertain. Now both Akasha and Prana again are produced from the cosmic Mahat, the Universal Mind, the Brahma or Ishvara.'

Interestingly, Nasadiya Suktam throws up its hands in despair at the perplexity of creation and concludes with:

But, after all, who knows, and who can say
Whence it all came, and how creation happened?
The gods themselves are later than creation,
So who knows truly whence it has arisen?

This inexplicability of creation through inferential knowledge is fundamental in Hinduism.

Summing up

The Vedas set the boundary for Hinduism. Every new spiritual thought of the Hindus must have the sanction of the Vedas. Fortunately, they give tremendous freedom and flexibility to its adherents.

They contain everything that is essential for a man to live a meaningful, dignified and worthy life. They encourage the adherents to earn well and live well, and also goad them towards a highly moral life. They teach the ways and means to achieve anything that a person may be craving for, and they also lead the aspirants toward the Supreme Reality.

In these words of God, no one is left out. There is something for everybody. Even people with strong passions and desires find a way to have their wishes fulfilled through various sacrifices. This is how such people are slowly led towards a higher life.

Above all, the Vedas are unique in the world of scriptures, since they alone proclaim that one has to outgrow everything, including the Vedas themselves, to attain the Supreme.

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